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13

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**I**n the last issue we had occasion to welcome back two authors returning to AHMM's pages after a too-long absence. This time around we are pleased to say there is yet a third. During the seventies, Gary Brandner published some eighteen stories in this magazine; in this issue can be found Number 19, a very entertaining P.I. tale.

Also herein, a new story by Linda Haldeman, this one having to do with Puccini's *Tosca*. And if that sounds like a rather different pair of stories, read on! Colleen Kobe, for instance, takes us to the moon (that's right, the moon); Dan Sproul is back with one of his hilarious racetrack stories; John Suter introduces us to a master stonemason; Gary Alexander offers a clever little story in the form of a household tips column; and

the Mystery Classic is one of Jack London's tales of the far north. B. Newton—a previous Mysterious Photograph winner, by the way—makes his full-length-story debut with a wisecracking mute P.I., but Loren Estleman departs from his own P.I. series this time around.

Nancy Swoboda's "detective" runs a luncheonette at a small college; Jule Selbo introduces us to a very likable family of amateur investigators; and James Noble's Winnie and Thatch are... well, Winnie and Thatch.

Finally, Thomas Wylde—also making a first-time appearance in AHMM, though he has published stories in the science fiction and fantasy fields—presents a comedy about a thief who decides to reform but finds unexpected obstacles at hand.

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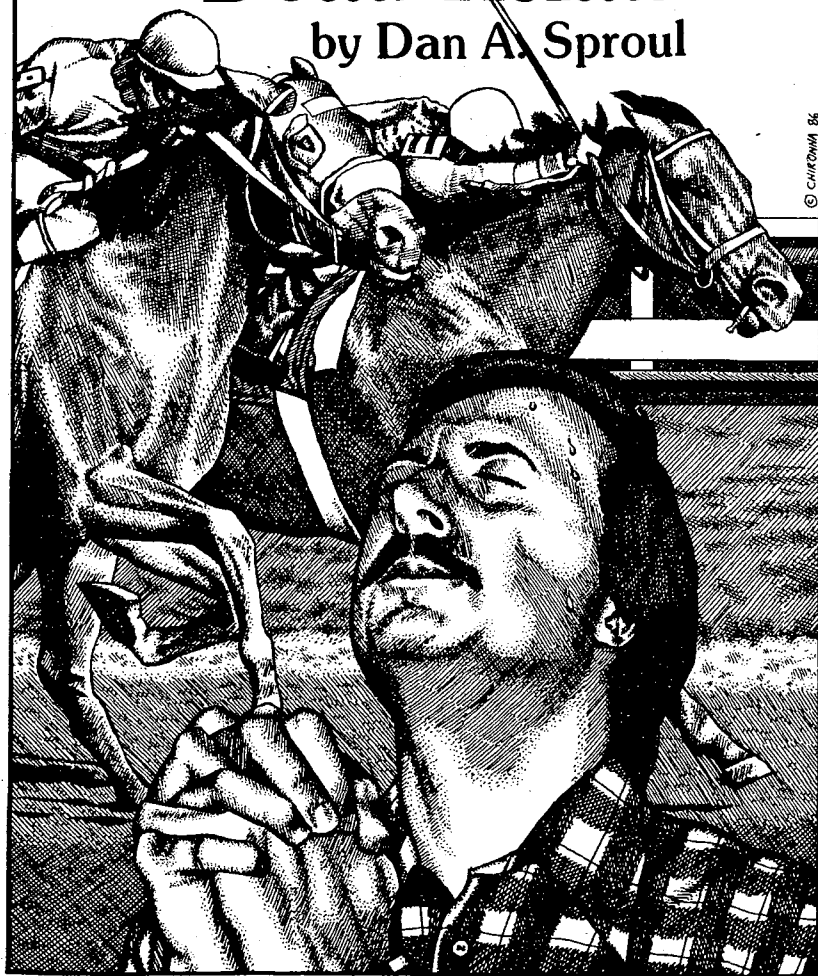
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# Praying to Dead Relatives

by Dan A. Sproul



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I never saw a cockroach until I was twenty-three. That can be a hindrance in your adult life. Growing up middle income in the Midwest doesn't really prepare you for some of the difficulties of later life.

I watched this cockroach, a large fat one. It made futile attempts to scale the slick side of a bathtub. Now, there are all kinds of cockroaches; this particular one was the Southern Florida variety. In Florida they call the species Palmetto bugs, probably to lessen adverse effects on tourism. Bad business to let it be known that the cockroach, that leper of the insect world, thrives in the dank, dark, humid places amidst the sterile playworld of the rich, famous, and old. The Palmetto bug moniker lends more class, more splendor, and it might easily be grouped with the well-respected ladybug or June bug by the uninitiated.

You might ask why a sane man would fancy watching a healthy, adult cockroach . . . er, Palmetto bug, skitter around inside a bathtub. Not by choice, believe me. How I came to be here, in this crummy bathroom, is rather an involved story. To blame everything on my uneventful childhood in the Midwest would be misleading. I guess it all started nine months ago when Nancy got pregnant. Nancy's my wife. I happened to

be between jobs at the time. Well, now wait a minute, it didn't really start there either. I guess it really started about a week ago, Nancy was getting, well, you know, rather large. She'd had to leave her job at the restaurant and I began to wonder how I was going to pay for the baby. I happened to be between jobs at the time. Before coming south I made my living selling aluminum siding and playing the horses at Thistle-down. Not much of a demand for aluminum siding here. But racetracks, well, that's a different story.

It costs about two grand to have a baby these days, if you dispense with all that prenatal care business. We had managed to save up about nine dollars and eighty cents, but the rent was past due on the apartment, that was four hundred dollars, so you can see we were in kind of a hard situation.

Naturally, in the circles I travel, one is never totally without recourse. With a small bankroll and a little luck, a little faith, and no small amount of talent, the hopeless circumstance we found ourselves in could quickly be resolved. But the bankroll posed a problem. After an unfortunate experience some years back, I made a pact with myself. Never would I bet another tip from an insider, never would I borrow money

to gamble with, and never ever again would I borrow money from Tony DeLumbardo. Tony got ten percent a day. Well, I didn't bet a tip but . . .

"Your credit stinks, McBride. How you gonna pay me back?"

"Nancy will be back to work as soon as she has the baby. And they need a bartender at the Reef Club."

"You ain't no bartender, and you ain't ever had no job so long as I knowed ya."

Things were getting precarious, so I used my ace in the hole. "I never welshed on you before, did I? And besides my mother died up in Ohio and left everything to me. I'll get that money in a week or so."

He gave me the fish eye, like he knew I was lying. So I whipped out a telegram I'd had my old friend Jack Foster send from Ohio, which had cost me seven of my nine dollars. I figured Jack went too far signing it "the Law Firm of Swinehart, Dickhoff, and Dingleburg." No doubt he was probably still a little ticked off about the fifty I borrowed just before me and Nancy went south.

Tony was a slow reader. It took him several minutes to absorb the ten words. "Hmm . . ." he said, handing the telegram back. "So how much you figure you'll get?"

"Hard to tell. Maybe ten thousand." A big lie was easier

to get away with in these circumstances. The truth is my parents were both living in Arizona on Social Security in a mobile home community. I doubt either had seen ten thousand in one pile in their entire life.

"So how much do you want?" Tony asked.

"How about five grand?"

Tony's blubbery features scrunched up into ugly and mean. "You get the hell outta here before I have Claude break your leg."

"Oh, well . . . Okay then, how about a thousand?"

He gave me his weird look while he kicked the idea around. "I get ten percent a day," he finally said. "Collected weekly. You know what happens to deadbeats."

"You haven't got a thing to worry about," I reassured him.

Well, there wasn't any time to waste because Nancy was four days overdue and Mrs. Goldstein, our landlady, was making eviction noises and posting nasty little notes on our door.

The first thing I did was take four hundred over to Mrs. G. She lived on the other side of our duplex. Her son was a sergeant with Miami Metro. She was fond of beating us over the head with him when we ran a few days over on the rent. It seemed expedient to get her off our necks at once. That left six

hundred in the bankroll. Then there was Nancy. I gave her a hundred for groceries and household expenses, which left five hundred. She, naturally, wondered where I got the money. So I told her. No, not about Tony DeLumbardo, not in her delicate condition. I told her I hit a horse at Gulfstream with our nine bucks. Of course, you and I know that's impossible. I mean, how could you get a thousand back for nine bucks? The horse would have to be a hundred and twelve to one. She didn't know much about the horses, fortunately, so it wasn't a big deal to slide that one past her.

Then things began to get sticky. I had the five hundred, plenty of bankroll. I got a *Racing Form* down at the drugstore every morning. Finally, I found this horse in the eighth race at Gulfstream. Now, I'm a particular type of horseplayer. I play angles. If you were to check around, you'd find out that the only successful horseplayers, those making a living, are the guys that play angles. They don't play every race. They don't play many races at all. What they do is look for an angle—a particular situation. Some angle players bet unchallenged early speed. Some are grass specialists. Some play trainers or jockey situations. I have the best luck when I can find a

cheap horse with lots of early speed that's been going a mile or more. When a horse like that drops into a seven furlong race, that's seven eighths of a mile, he seems to win every time if his fractions through the early part of his last race were exceptionally fast. Seems like lower price horses don't have much stamina for the stretch run. It's called a turnback in racing circles. Anyway, that's what I was looking for, a turnback, and this horse, his name was Joker Jack, he looked to fit the bill perfect.

Now we come to the sticky part. I couldn't leave Nancy at home. She could go into labor at any time, being as she was already past due. I should say overdue. Being considered a chronic deadbeat can influence a person's viewpoint.

Another problem was the fact that it took me six days to find Joker Jack, which meant that Tony would be wanting his interest payment of seven hundred and I had to stay out of his way because Joker Jack wasn't going to run until Saturday, the seventh day. Tony didn't rest on the seventh day, so I had to hustle Nancy out of the apartment early in the morning and fiddle around until post time. We went shopping for baby clothes.

The delay in finding Joker Jack and the baby's wardrobe put a pretty good dent in what



was left of the original thousand dollars. When we burst out of Sears into the January sunshine, just \$267.93 remained in my bankroll. That wasn't the only problem, either.

I now had on my hands a past due pregnant woman, two shopping bags full of baby clothes, and no car. I glanced at the untanned white spot on my wrist where my Pulsar used to be. They knew what time it was at Buster and Lenny's hock shop, thanks to me. The Mall Savings Bank had a big time and temperature display. It was two eighteen P.M., seventy-six degrees, and time to open your six month CD if you wanted a memory phone or a toaster.

If the Mall Bank was right, we had a couple of hours to get to the track because Jack wouldn't be going until the eighth race. 'Course, Gulfstream is all the way up in Hallendale, and we were all the way downtown. But we got lucky and caught a northbound bus that went straight out Biscayne Boulevard; with a little more shuffling around we ended up at the grandstand entrance at about three fifteen. I paid our way in and hustled Nancy over to the escalators—she was pretty uncomfortable with all the walking. We found a couple of seats in the upper grandstand. I drug out the *Racing Form* and started to get settled. The nags

for the sixth race were just trooping out onto the track; we would have to wait an hour or so. I pulled out the program and checked the eighth race, just to make sure Joker Jack wasn't scratched. There he was. Set to start out of the number four post. A good spot for him, and he was ten to one on the morning line. It was about then that everything began to come unglued.

I am thinking at the time, if I bet two hundred on him and he holds at ten to one, I can clear twenty-two hundred, enough to pay Tony and still have a few bucks to clink together.

"Jimmy . . ."

Now, Nancy has the prettiest blue eyes, they crinkle up at the corners real cute when she laughs. They were crinkled up now but she wasn't laughing. "What's the matter?" I asked her.

"I got this funny feeling. It's like a kind of pressure . . . I think it might be time."

"Wait a minute now . . . just a minute, maybe it's something you ate. We can't leave. We just got here."

She bent over in the seat holding her stomach with her eyes closed. Then she groaned.

"All right . . . all right . . . let's not panic," I told her. "What we have to do is time the contractions." I looked at the un-

tanned spot on my wrist again. "What we'll do is count."

"Aaaaagggggh," she moaned back at me.

"Okay, okay . . . one, two, three . . ."

"Ohhh . . . aggggh—quit that stupid counting—I tell you the baby's coming."

"But . . . I still have to make a bet . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about? You want me to have the baby on the cement floor here . . . aaaahh."

"Wait a minute . . . just a minute. You can't have the baby now." I could tell she wasn't listening to reason. She turned her head away and began to cry into one of the Sears bags between moans.

I don't need to tell you a hell of a situation was developing. Then it dawned on me. I didn't have to stay for the race. With the new computerized mutuels and advanced wagering, I could bet the eighth race any time I wanted.

"You wait right here," I said. "I'm going to get an ambulance."

She nodded into the baby clothes and I took off up the aisle. Bad timing, all the sellers' windows were jammed with long lines of people waiting to get in last minute bets on the sixth race. I spotted a security guard leaning up against a stairwell railing that led to the lower level. He had his finger

in his ear and was corkscrewing it around in there.

"Hey . . . maybe you can help me. My wife's down there having a baby."

He wiped his finger on his pants. "I don't think that's allowed," he said. "We'll have to get her down to the infirmary."

The sixth race was almost history, the fans backed up to the windows had dwindled to a precious few. They shouted obscenities and unkind remarks about the parentage of those purchasing tickets in the front of the lines as the starter opened the gate and shut them out.

"Right down here," I directed. And took the guard down to Nancy. She had recovered from the attack, but she told us there wasn't much time because the contractions were very close together. We didn't question it. Women seem to know about that sort of thing. It took us quite a while to get her down to the infirmary. We had to take it slow and stop pretty often. Finally, Elmo, he was the guard, called for help and they took her the rest of the way on a stretcher. I tried to get over to the windows while we were waiting for the stretcher. A speedball by the name of Thatababy won the sixth, \$2.40, \$2.20, and \$2.10, a heavy favorite, the windows were piled deep again, this time for the minuscule payoff.

Could be it was a omen, That-ababy. What a hunch to play, but I never found it a good practice to play for twenty cents on the dollar.

Probably surprise a lot of people to find out that major race-tracks keep a staffed infirmary. There was a doctor on call and a nurse in attendance. A guy with a big nose who looked to be hitting on the nurse went for the doctor while the nurse attended to Nancy. She locked me and Elmo out of the room.

"Look, Elmo. I got to get a bet down. It's life or death."

"You can't leave," Elmo said. "There's papers to fill out."

"I'll only be gone a minute."

He shook his head. "Nope. Can't do it."

"How about if you make it for me?"

"Can't do it. Won't be nobody here to watch you," he explained.

I stacked the bags of baby clothes against the wall and took a deferent tack. "Look, Elmo, you got my wife and all these baby clothes for collateral. Now I'm only going down the hall there and around the corner to the mutuel windows. It'll take two minutes, you can come along." Elmo looked indecisive. "There's ten bucks in it for you." He was wavering. "I mean just two minutes, Elmo. What can it hurt?"

When we got to the sellers'

windows, fans were lined up fifteen and twenty deep at each window, studying programs, clutching tightly to their bank-rolls, all set to plunge on the seventh race.

"ONE MINUTE TO POST," the track announcer advised us. I got in line behind an old lady with one of them aluminum walker things. Elmo watched me nervously as the line inched slowly forward.

"THEY'RE IN THE GATE."

Finally the old lady scrunched her aluminum framework up against the seller's window. "I want to key the six on top of the field in a dollar tri-box. How much is that?" she asked the mutuels clerk. Then she totally confused him by adding, "But leave out the three, he ain't got no chance."

"THEY'RE OFF!"

BLANNNNNNNG, went the bell. The old lady and me got shut out.

Elmo started for me. I put my hand up. "Wait, Elmo," I said. "I'm betting the eighth race." The old lady hobbled off, cursing inside her framework. I moved up to the window.

"Hurry up," Elmo urged.

I drug the two hundred out of my pocket. "Two hundred on the four to win," I told the seller, a little Cuban fellow. He punched the keys and nothing happened, no ticket popped out. He punched the keys again.

Still nothing.

"Sometime jew 'ave to be waitin' a minute," he explained.

So I'm standing there bouncing from one foot to another, Elmo is getting on my case, my wife is having a baby, and Tony, who no doubt wants to break more than my leg by now, comes around the corner. Close behind him is Claude, whose head is two feet above the many short people in the crowd. He spots me at once and points.

"Hokay, es working now. What jew wan?"

It's hard to admit, but I was pretty rattled about this time. I had a lot of things on my mind. "Two hundred to win," I shouted.

I could see Claude fighting through the crowd. For more than an hour one thing had been going through my brain over and over: eighth race number four; eighth race number four; eighth . . .

"Eighth," I squawked like a simpleton.

The little Cuban punched out a two hundred dollar ticket on the number eight.

No time to argue about it. I grabbed the ticket and took off. I wouldn't have made it two steps except that Claude, who was trying to grab me, ran into Elmo, who was trying to grab me.

With Elmo and Claude tangled up on the floor, I made it

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to the second level grandstand. Tony was short and fat with a gouty leg; I left him far behind when I ran up the down escalator.

I know what you're thinking. You figure the eight wins at a big price and I pay everybody off. Maybe in a fairytale. An old superstition among horseplayers is never to return a wrongly issued ticket because it's sure to win if you do. The appendage to that should read: It may very well win if you turn it back in, but it's sure as hell going to lose if you keep it. Didn't matter because once I left the window it was my ticket. The thing I had to do was get something down on Joker Jack. I had fifty bucks left, and about five minutes to post.

Jack was nine to one on the toteboard, a twenty dollar horse. If he stayed at nine to one, fifty would get me back five hundred, enough to get Tony away from my legs. I made the bet and worked my way over to the south end of Gulfstream, through the clubhouse. I went down to the ground level and started back toward the infirmary. I grabbed a discarded *Racing Form* out of a trash can, the leavings of a disgruntled patron, no doubt. Out of curiosity, I checked out the number eight horse. He was a real bum all right, and holding at ninety-nine to one on the board. That's

all the higher it goes. He could have been three hundred to one for all I knew, and probably should have been. And his name . . . are you ready for this . . . Bonus Baby.

When I got back to the infirmary the door was still shut. Elmo was gone, the hall was empty except for the baby clothes. I banged on the door. It popped open at once and the nurse stuck her head out. "Just stay out there. We'll call you," she told me, and slammed the door in my face.

I'm standing out there cooling my heels for only a few seconds before "THEY'RE OFF!" blares out over the speaker system and I get the race call piped into the hallway.

"IT'S BONUS BABY BREAKING ON TOP . . . A LENGTH BACK TO AMICAL MAN, THEN TACHO MALO, A HEAD TO JOKER JACK . . . MOLDY JOE BEAMMEUP, DELRAY DEAN . . . TWO LENGTHS TO BAGMAN — MYSTERIOUS FRED, A TOUCHMUCH, AND SNYDERBITER TRAILS. INTO THE FIRST TURN IT'S BONUS BABY OPENING UP THREE LENGTHS. TACHO MALO RANGES UP TO BE SECOND, A HALF LENGTH BACK TO JOKER JACK . . ."

I'd heard enough. There is only so much the human soul can endure. I grabbed the baby



clothes and trotted up the hall and around the corner to the betting windows, sliding to a stop at a TV monitor.

"BONUS BABY IS OPENING UP A COMMANDING EIGHT-LENGTH LEAD INTO THE STRETCH TURN, JOKER JACK HAS MOVED INTO SECOND AND THREE LENGTHS BACK TO . . ." Bonus Baby was so far out in front I couldn't see Joker Jack on the monitor. It was a dream come true, he was locked at ninety-nine to one on the tote and I had two hundred on his nose. At a hundred to one, how much is that? It boggles the mind. The camera on the monitor pans back as Bonus Baby nears the sixteenth pole. Joker Jack is gaining. But slowly. My mind is working frantically; two hundred times a hundred dollars—how much is that?

Bonus Baby begins to take choppy little steps. The jock aboard goes to the whip, once, twice, again . . . he's still out in front by five a mere seventy yards from the finish, but he is running in slow motion. Joker Jack is coming fast now, long, powerful, ground-eating strides. Two hundred times a hundred dollars. I break into a scream, "Keep going you miserable ##\*\*%#!#()\*&%\$#." Then I begin to pray to dead relatives. Twenty yards to go. The jock is just riding now, there's no re-

sponse to the whip. Sweat-drenched and blowing hard, still in front by a length and a half, but barely moving, Bonus Baby hears Joker Jack coming.

There is something in old, good racehorses, heart I guess you would call it. They may lose their youth and ability to run with really top horses, but they never seem to lose the will to win. Bonus Baby grabbed the bit for one good lunge to stay in front. Joker Jack came to him, his speed increasing with each stride, they ran on even terms for an instant. Then, five yards from the finish, muscles glistening, Joker Jack moved in front to take the race by a head. Praying to dead relatives never works, especially if I use my Uncle Elmer.

Two hairy hands grabbed me from behind. I recognized the sleeves of Claude's tweed jacket hooked to the hands.

"So, you been shoppin', McBride," he sez to me.

"Look, Claude—"

"Tony wants to talk to you," Claude informs me. "Let's just take a walk out to the car. I'll take you over to him and you two can have a nice chat."

"Claude. I can't leave. My wife's having a baby in the track infirmary."

"Sure she is," Claude acknowledged. "Come on."

Claude escorted me to the parking lot at a brisk clip, the

baby clothes bags banging into our thighs relentlessly. The conversation in the car was limited.

"Claude, I can pay, I got a winner . . ."

"Shut up! . . . Tell it to Tony."

So I shut up and we drove for about five minutes to a small frame house in Hallendale. Tony rents out a bunch of dilapidated firetraps about the city. This one had broken, grungy green slate shingles covering the outside, more or less. A couple of windows were broken out on the side. Obviously unrentable, and unoccupied at the present. It looked deserted, no cars in front.

There wasn't any furniture in the place, so me and Claude stood looking at each other.

"Tony'll be here in a minute," Claude said.

I nodded. Not really thrilled at the prospect.

"I gotta go to the john," Claude said after a minute or two of silence. "You're gonna go with me." It wasn't a request.

So we went to the john. Claude kept a hold on my arm. No mean achievement under the circumstances. Tony still hadn't shown.

"Look, Claude, I had fifty bucks on that number four horse in the eighth, he was nine to one. That's five hundred. Here's the ticket." Claude snatched the ticket out of my hand, then

reached down and flushed the commode. He studied the ticket for a second then crumpled it up and tossed it into the bathtub.

"I saw the race," he said. "The four won all right, but that ticket ain't on the four."

I had given him the Bonus Baby ticket by mistake. I reached back into my shirt-pocket and pulled out the other ticket.

"Sorry . . . here it is."

Claude grabbed the other ticket and gave it the once-over. "Yeah, number four, the eighth race. Hell of a race. I seen it. You sure he was nine to one?"

"Positive."

About then Tony shuffled in. Claude told him the deal on the ticket.

"This is only going to buy you twenty-four hours, McBride," Tony told me, jamming the ticket in his shirt-pocket. "I want the other two hundred, the balance of your interest, by five tomorrow."

"That's great, Tony. Do you suppose Claude could give me a ride back to the track, my wife . . ."

"Get out," Tony said.

It took me twenty minutes to get back to Gulfstream. I could have made it in fifteen but the baby clothes slowed me somewhat. They were bringing out the horses for the tenth race when I trotted across the ground

floor grandstand. Elmo and two other guards latched onto me by the stairs leading to the second level.

"Hey, Elmo. Where the hell was you a half hour ago when I was dragged outta here against my will?"

"You ain't gettin' away from me this time," Elmo said. "Your wife wants to see you."

"Yeah, well, I want to see her, too."

They marched me to the infirmary. Nancy was laid out on a stretcher with a baby in her arms. There was a bunch of people milling around. A tall fellow in a coatless suit with a stethoscope in hand spoke out.

"You must be Mr. McBride," he said. "There wasn't time to get her to the ambulance. We had to make the delivery here. It's a healthy baby boy. Everything is just fine, but we're going to take your wife for a short stay in the hospital just for observation." He pumped my hand and introduced me to the president of the track. Then I shook hands with the Racing Secretary. They had me sign a release form of some kind. A couple of reporters took my picture and started asking questions. I lied to them, trying to work my way over to Nancy.

I got hold of her hand and started following the stretcher down the hallway. "Look, honey, I got the baby clothes," I told

her. It was the only thing I could think of at the moment. She nodded and smiled. I think she was probably doped up on something. I asked one of the guys pushing the gurney which hospital they were taking her to. He told me and I took off in the opposite direction.

There was one other thing I had to check before I left the track. I had to find out what Joker Jack paid. I had told Claude he was nine to one, but I got so involved with Bonus Baby I didn't notice what Jack finally went off at, and Claude hustled me away before they posted the results. I figured I could make a quick detour, check the results board which listed the payoffs for the races run that day, and make it out to the ambulance before it left for the hospital.

I am thinking at the time, if Joker Jack dropped to seven or eight to one, Tony will come up short, and I probably didn't have twenty-four hours. On the other hand, if he went to ten or eleven to one, I might have bought some extra time. Crazy things like that go through your mind when you're desperate.

The results board is just a chalkboard with the race numbers painted on and lined spaces to list first, second, and third place finishers and their payoffs for each race.

My eyes traveled down the win column looking for Joker Jack . . . all the way down. He wasn't on there. My eyes were going up and down the board like a yo-yo. Bonus Baby was listed as the eighth race winner, with an asterisk. Joker Jack was placed third. The explanation was given at the bottom of the board. "Joker Jack was disqualified from first place for interference to Tacho Malo on the stretch turn and placed third."

Sweet Jesus . . . the win payoff for Bonus Baby was \$238.60. I had it a hundred times . . . \$23,860.00. I dropped the baby clothes and commenced to make noises like a caribou in heat. Then I remembered, I didn't have the ticket. And just as important, the ticket I gave Tony would only buy me a trip to a bone doctor.

Claude threw my ticket on Bonus Baby in the bathtub. Did he remember it was on the eight horse? I told them I was going back to the track. As soon as they found out the ticket on Jack was no good, would they be in here looking for me, or back at Tony's rental grabbing the Bonus Baby ticket? Claude was a dummy, chances were good he wouldn't remember . . . maybe.

I grabbed the baby clothes and took off running up Hallen-

dale Beach Boulevard. I used a bag of baby clothes to bash out the remaining glass in one of Tony's living room windows. That's how I come to be in this crummy bathroom.

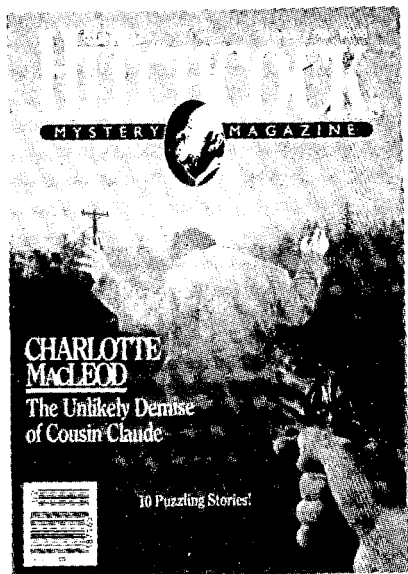
The Palmetto bug made one more futile attempt to scale the side of the tub, then I guess he figured the hell with it, and crawled down the drain. The Bonus Baby ticket was all wadded up, still lying in the tub. The damn cockroach had been nibbling on the corner, looked like he ate about five dollars' worth of my twenty-three grand.

Well, whatever the baby cost it couldn't even come close to twenty-three thousand. Imagine being born at the track—the kid had to be a natural. Hard to figure if we had enough baby clothes or not. One thing for sure, I'd have to get some new bags, these were tore all to hell.

All I had to do now was dodge Tony all day Sunday until I could cash the ticket Monday. Camping out in the hospital waiting room would take care of that.

Sure, Tony will get his money. I'll send him back a thousand, no interest, from California. I know this nice little apartment just a few minutes from Santa Anita.

Maybe praying to dead relatives really does work. Thanks, Uncle Elmer.



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FICTION

# Brotherly Concerns

by B. Newton



---

I'll tell you straight off—I can't speak. I mean, I'm mute. And I'll tell you, too, sometimes it's a bitch.

Take the morning I locked myself in the bathroom and got the new fire alarm installed. In fact, you could take that whole week if you wanted, but I'll keep to the morning it all started.

The knob and lock on the bathroom door are old, been there for years (along with the house, which you may not have assumed) and sometimes, if you shut the door just right, the whole stupid mechanism jams and you're locked in, feeling like a complete idiot. Don't ask me how or why: if I knew, I'd get around to fixing the damn thing, but hell, I'm a P.I., not a mechanical engineer.

So that morning when I went in to shower I just happened to shut the door just right.

As soon as the door clicked teasingly I knew. And Charlotte, my live-in maid (I'll have to tell you about that sometime), was away for the week visiting her family in the U.P. for the university's spring break. So banging on the door would do little good—I tried anyway out of lack of imagination. Waste of time. No one came.

Well, then I wiggled and jiggled and twisted and yanked and damn near made love to the

thing before I gave up and sat on the edge of the tub with my chin in my palms to figure out how long I could live without food—I didn't have to worry about water. I had tubs full. Or entertainment. I could always flush and watch the water swirl and gurgle down the drain, that usually makes me laugh . . . or sick.

No doubt I would have rotted in there (or been hypnotized into a vegetable by swirling water) if Murray hadn't dropped by to install my birthday present: a fire alarm that's somehow hooked up to a person's telephone line and wired right into the local fire department. It goes off, they get the signal and come running. They're supposed to, anyway. Don't ask me how that works, either. I've no idea. And could care less. This house hasn't caught fire in over seventy years—why should it start now?

But Murray doesn't think that way. He's got a practical way of thinking that makes him a good lawyer and a good partner but a pest of a younger brother. He thinks he should look out for me because I can't speak; he should be so afflicted.

"You locked yourself in the john again? Good God, Al. What if I hadn't stopped by? Charlotte's gone, isn't she? What would you have done? Probably

rotted, for God's sake."

He took the words right out of my mouth.

Murray's kind of tall, slim, clean shaven, wears suits; he's, well, he's a lawyer. That should say it all. It has been my good fortune to know him since birth, and he continues to show me new faces. It bugs the hell out of me.

"You've got to be more careful, Al. I'm telling you, this fire alarm was one hell of an idea. It's going to save your life one of these days, mark my words. Do you know how easy it is to have a house burn down around you while you're sleeping? Very easy. Ve-rr-yy easy, I'll tell you. And you not being able to call anyone for help—good God, it'd be awful."

Murray's an optimist. I left him up on a step ladder weaving wires and telling me how much more I've got to be careful. The one thing I miss saying the most is "Murray, shut up."

This time I left the door open. I thought, what the hell, Charlotte's not here.

And that set me really thinking.

**A**t the office an hour later I thanked Murray for putting in the alarm. For taking the time. I knew he didn't have to.

"No-ooo problem, big brother."

He sorted papers on his desk, looked up and smiled. "We gotta look out for each other, right?"

I gave him a wink and an "okay" sign, and sat down in the chair next to him. We share the office but not the desk. I'm the legman of the team, it's been that way from the start, and as I told Murray when he complained I needed a desk, he could answer the phone, I'd tote the gun. It's worked just fine.

I was flipping through the *Free Press*, Murray finishing off a report on a repo job I'd done the other afternoon, when the door opened (unfortunately, we have no secretary, though I've been talking to Charlotte and with that cute little smile of hers she said she'd think about it) and in walked a very trim, very well-cut, well-tailored guy. The kind of guy who carries an umbrella when the sun couldn't shine harder if it grunted. He had it with him now.

Murray looked up, stood. I didn't, but I did lower the paper to my lap and raise my right brow.

"May I help you?" asked Murray, reaching to shake.

"I certainly hope so." The guy sat down in front of the desk. "My name is Walter Dewbury, and I need your assistance."

"Well, Mr. Dewbury, you've come to the right place. What can we do for you?"

Mr. Dewbury looked at me. I looked at him. Then he looked back to Murray. "It's very personal," he said.

I bet, I thought.

Murray waved a hand. "Mr. Albert Hubbs is my partner."

"I see," he said with a little more than doubt. "One of the A's in AAAM Investigations?"

"Just so," said Murray.

Murray's good at that, sounding confident and assured. Really we decided on AAAM Investigations because it would get us the first spot in the yellow pages. I guess you could say it stands for "Al And Also Murray Investigations." But Murray's right. It sounds better if you let them assume there's a whole flock of you.

"First," said Dewbury, clearing his throat, "I must be assured of complete confidentiality?"

"Done," said Murray. He peaked his hands under his chin and lightly tapped his fingertips together. I have to admit when Murray wants to make an impression he plays it up big.

"Because," continued Dewbury, "as I said, this is a very delicate matter."

"Understood."

I went back to my paper, but I was listening. That's one thing I can still do pretty good—listen.

"I need you gentlemen to

make a . . . a dropoff for me."

"A dropoff?" said Murray. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I guess there is no other way to say it than to just—say it."

That's what you think, buddy.

"The beginning," said Murray. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

"Very well." He all but sighed.

"You see, a painting of mine was stolen. A very expensive painting. Italian. Do you know anything about art?"

Murray knew I didn't. So he didn't ask. He just shook his head and said, "I'm afraid not, Mr. Dewbury."

"I see," he said. And there seemed to be a tone of relief in those two words, "I see." It brought my attention from around the *Free Press*, and I saw him set the umbrella on the desk, and cross his legs, and take out a cigarette case from the breast pocket of his suit coat. He asked if we minded his smoking, and Murray said of course not. I would have said if he didn't mind my singing—and I used to be a pretty bad singer (always look at the bright side, my mother used to say).

He blew smoke. "Well, that isn't important anyhow. What is important is that this painting from my personal collection was stolen two days ago."

"You reported it to the police?" asked Murray.

"Ah, no. You see, as I told you, this is a very delicate situation. That's why I need *private* investigators. It so happens that the thieves who took the painting got in touch with me yesterday afternoon and are willing to sell me my painting back. I want you to make the switch for me."

I looked at Murray and he asked my thought: "Why?"

"Why. Yes. Well, you see, I have reason to believe that the thieves may very well attempt to take the money without giving me my painting. They sound fairly knowledgeable about paintings and could possibly know where to locate another buyer. Frankly, I'm afraid."

That was legit. At least he didn't try hedging around the fact.

"How much are they asking, Mr. Dewbury?" asked Murray.

"A hundred thousand."

Murray whistled. I gave in and lowered the paper once again to my lap and looked at the fool. A hundred thousand for a *painting*?

"I'm aware it's a lot of money, but I assure you the painting is worth much more. I will pay *you* fifteen hundred just to make sure the swap goes smoothly and I get my painting back safely."

Murray was taking notes. "Who did you say the painting

was by, Mr. Dewbury? Just for our records, of course."

"By? Oh, the artist. Yes, I see." He cleared his throat again. "Terribly sorry. I'm allergic to dust."

Dust? Now *that* must be a bitch.

"The painting was done by Monet. Have you heard of him?"

"Impressionist?"

"Yes. Exactly. Now, as I was saying, I will pay you fifteen hundred dollars if you will take this on. But there is one difficulty."

Murray quit scribbling notes, looked up. "Yes?" he said.

"They set the time for the dropoff at noon."

We all looked at the clock on the wall. It was ten after eleven now. Murray looked at me, the legman.

I nodded.

"We'll take care of it, Mr. Dewbury," said Murray. And they went about setting up the details. I went back to my paper.

But something, somewhere, was bugging me like an itch.

**G**roeb Park was the site for the dropoff. I knew why when I got there.

First, it was a twenty minute ride outside the city. I could probably have made it faster if I had known where I was going. Second, it was wil-



derness. There were small gravel parking lots all around the park where you could pull up and look out over the river that played at being the park's artery. It was a nice river. Not too deep for wading, not too shallow for fishing or canoeing. I even saw some white water down around the bend I was following on the "blue" path marked for hikers and bird-watchers and lovers. There were lots of trees (again, for bird-watchers and lovers), and small open clearings with heaps of sun and Queen Anne's lace rising up all around. The woodchip paths circled back on one another and branched off and opened up and died in several of those clearings. Getting lost wouldn't be easy, but it could be done. Murray could probably give it a whirl. Behind a desk he's safe. Walking around in somewhere like Groeb Park he'd be an Alice in Wonderland. He gets lost in the supermarket.

I was three minutes early. The location they had chosen was beautiful. There wasn't a soul around, and not likely to be. A small rock formation rose up behind me, easily scaled but a fine shielder of view. The river, I guess it'd be Groeb River, was a few feet in front of me, easily crossed but, again, a good concealer. Three paths converged here as if they had

all zipped in just to check up on one another and then taken off again. There was lots of open sky and sun. It was a fine location for a dropoff. No observing, no trailing, no following. I chalked one up for them.

I set the briefcase against the rocks, sat down and leaned back on my elbows, and turned my face up to the sun. Sun's a good thing, if you ask me.

The plan was to check the painting before letting them get away, make sure it was a beach scene with parasols, and then let them split. Dewbury wanted no "hero antics"—and that was okay by me. I was to take the painting to a parking lot on the other side of Groeb and hand it over to him. He'd be waiting in his car. At that time he would give me the thousand he still owed us. Simple, the way I like things.

I heard them coming but didn't get up, just opened my eyes and turned my head. I didn't even show my surprise when it was a woman who came up the "green" path. She struck me as elegant the way she walked over the woodchips and carried the long gray tube under her arm. But she wore jeans and sneakers and a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows, and as she came closer her face and the way her black hair fell around it said to me

something different altogether: rugged. And a little harried, too.

"You got the money?" she asked, not hard but quickly.

I patted the case and smiled.

"Here." She handed me the tube and reached for the money against the rocks. I grabbed her wrist, and shook my head, and held up a finger, and tapped the tube.

She sighed. "So hurry up," she said.

I slid the canvas from the tube and unrolled it, and there was a fuzzy beach scene with parasols. Looked like the thing had been painted with dots; made you wonder if you needed glasses. I squinted. I frowned. A hundred thousand *bucks*? I shrugged.

I let go of her wrist and nudged the case, and stood up before rolling the canvas back into the tube.

She grabbed the dough and started for the "red" path, which crossed the river a ways down. Her parting words were, "What, don't you talk?" And she was gone.

Which was good.

In the gravel lot on the other side of the park I found Dewbury waiting in his car. He seemed anxious and jittery: maybe because he was without his umbrella—a fetish can do that to you.

I gave him his hundred thousand dollar need-glasses painting. He was pleased and tossed it in the back seat and gave me our thousand. I was pleased and stuck it in my back pocket. That was it. Simple.

Except that on the way back to the office I realized that now *two* things were bugging me. I don't like it when buggings collect.

It usually means a swarm.

**I** was right.

The next morning Murray came in just as I was getting ready for my shower. I told him his timing was perfect and asked if he had another alarm. Maybe a tornado one?

He didn't laugh. Of course, jokes do seem to lose a little something in sign language, but still, laughing is almost a common courtesy. Then again, we're brothers.

I noticed he had Dewbury's umbrella and questioned it with a point and a lift of the eyebrow—it's very effective.

"He left it," explained Murray, tossing it on the couch. "You did tell me the job went okay, right? No hitches? No surprises?"

I nodded. Smooth, I told him.

"Well, Al," he said, "Lieutenant Quise of Homicide called me last night at home. He had interesting news." He strolled

into the kitchen. I followed. He always treats me like I'm a jury he needs to bait along, then whips out the surprise evidence, and I'm supposed to gasp. I rarely do.

He poured a cup of coffee, sipped it, looked at me. "He told me they found Mr. Dewbury's body in his car out at Groeb Park."

Okay, so I gasped.

"Exactly," said Murray. "Exactly. It seems they found our card on the body and wanted to know what dealings he had had with us. Naturally, I explained—not that he needed it—the theory of client confidentiality."

I gave him a nod and the thumbs up.

"At *first*," he said. "At first. When he mentioned finding the painting and a briefcase filled with neatly cut newspaper, I told him what we knew. I saw no reason to withhold the information, seeing as our client was dead—shot twice in the chest, by the way—and it was obviously his own fault. I hope you don't mind." Actually, he probably didn't care if I minded at all—but I shrugged.

"Good."

I asked if he had had the chance to glance inside the briefcase before the drop.

"No," he said. "It would appear that Mr. Dewbury set

us—or rather you—up quite cleverly.

"But it would also appear that he was hoisted by his own petard. I can only say thank God it wasn't you. I would never have been able to forgive myself."

At times, Murray can be melodramatic.

"Evidently, these thieves are some rough customers and Mr. Dewbury had a reason to be afraid. I resent his having jeopardized your life for a painting."

I shrugged again. We had his fifteen hundred, I signed.

"True." Murray drained his coffee. "Anyway, I stopped by to tell you I'm going to the Dewbury home to give the umbrella to his wife—you don't think that's callous, do you?"

I thought it was touching.

"And the lieutenant will want to see you later this morning. Get the details on the job." Murray dropped saying "talk with you" about six months after the shooting. He really does try. "Just tell him what happened and don't worry about anything. We're clear. I've checked it all out."

I agreed I was sure he had.

He left and I went to take my shower. I wanted to look "nice" for the lieutenant. As I worked on getting the temperature of the water right, I concentrated

on what exactly was bugging me about the other day. Something Dewbury had said that wasn't right. Or didn't seem right. And something about the woman when she picked the money up. Something . . . I got a towel . . . something . . . a wash rag . . . something . . .

As I shut the door it all fell into place. Well, not all of it. But enough to tell me Murray was in trouble and that I had better haul butt if I wanted to catch him and stop him from asking for any bullets to the head.

I forgot the shower and . . . you guessed it. The door had jammed, and I was locked in again.

I didn't have time to panic. I needed to get out and get to Murray—so I threw myself a dozen times into the door, tried to pick it with a toothbrush, and rattled that damn knob till I felt the rattling in my head, and *God*, I wanted to scream.

For only a second I was back in blue, and behind the pharmacy in the alley, gun drawn, and wanting to holler for Markowsky to look out, and just freezing. I saw and heard the whole thing again. The shots, the darkness, Markowsky's smile, the burning in my throat.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead. I turned the shower off. I rarely have flashbacks

any more. Even the nightmares have slackened. I sat on the edge of the tub and pressed my trembling hands between my knees and took a couple of deep breaths.

I tried to think.

Murray. Okay, what to do. There were no hinges to rip off, no windows to squeeze through, the ceiling was solid plaster, the floor warped tile. I tried to grin when I thought of going down the drain, but I didn't—grin, that is. I needed someone to get me out. Now. I could only think of Charlotte and damn her for being gone that week. The week of my birthday, no less . . .

I snapped my fingers and crossed myself although I'm not Catholic. I turned the shower back on. Hot. *All* hot. I turned the faucet on hot. Then, as steam filled the small room, I sat down by the base of the toilet where it was cool. The room swelled with steam, and it seeped under the door and up.

I think I prayed.

And if I did, someone answered. Six minutes after turning the shower on, that sweet, sweet fire alarm went off. Ten minutes later the fire department was ransacking my home, and I was pounding like a celled madman on the door. I've never sweated so much in all my life.

I hadn't the time to hang

around and chat, so I flew into fast and furious sign language, which confused and baffled them enough to let me get out the front door and to my car. At first when they came running after me I thought they might give chase in the big red truck, sirens going, calling the cops. They'd join in, and I'd have a first rate car chase on my hands. But they didn't. They just stood on the lawn and watched open-mouthed as I spun the car into the street and squealed away.

Murray had at least forty minutes on me. It was enough.

The note pinned under Murray's phone on his desk read:

Called the Dewbury home. Explained the problem to the butler. He told me I can find Mrs. Dewbury at Groeb Park. I think it's psychological. It happens. The lieutenant will stop by around ten. Routine questions. Relax. I've looked out for you.

Murray

I crumpled the note into my pocket. Groeb Park. Murray was walking into a storm of lead—with only an umbrella.

I met the lieutenant in the hall, shook my head "not now," and brushed by him towards the stairs.

"Al," he called.

I played deaf, too.

"Al, what's up?"

I waved, and left him in the hall, and took the stairs three, four steps at a time. Six flights and I didn't touch one landing.

**M**urray's car was on the side of the park I'd been directed to the day before. I pulled up next to it. It was empty and locked and the only one around. It had taken me twelve minutes to get to the park, another six to find his car. It would probably take me hours to find him. I didn't have hours.

I took my piece with me as I entered the trails. I looked for footprints or something like I was Daniel Boone and saw a whole lot of woodchips and fallen leaves, so I gave up. I hoped they were as lacking in imagination as I was and would ask Murray to come to the same place as the dropoff because it was so well suited for that kind of thing. Murder, I mean. So I headed off that way, knowing that if I was wrong and they had set it up for somewhere else I was less one brother. And one is all I have.

The woods seemed much quieter. I could hear the river rushing as if it wanted to get somewhere fast. My footsteps were soft, my breathing softer. I held my piece up around my

shoulder and every few seconds loosened and then tightened my grip. I strained my ears to hear anything that might sound like Murray—tripping, cursing, even crying: he's not the quietest woodsman. But there was nothing. A lonely bird. The falling of branches deep within. I passed from shadow into morning light and back into shadow. Trees rose up all around me, and I was sure they could see all that was going on beneath them, and I envied them.

The "blue" trail seemed to go on and on and on and on. At each bend I expected to come upon the rocks and the river and see Murray standing there with a look on his face asking, "Where 'am I?" But there was always only just another bend up ahead.

I kept getting flashes of behind the pharmacy.

I took a curve, and the sun lit the entire scene like a spotlight. Murray *was* standing there, umbrella in hand, looking stupid. Above him, atop the cliff, I saw the figure of a man rise up, brace a rifle against his shoulder, and take aim.

Look out, Murray, I screamed. And suddenly Murray was Markowsky, and the rocks were the large dumpster in the alley with the shadow moving from behind it, too. Then came the shots, and the bullet ricochet-

ing off the wall, ripping into my throat and taking my voice.

Markowsky catching the other five in his catcher's-mitt chest and not screaming either, just kind of jumping back into the wall and sliding down it, smiling a stupid little smile, his bear-paw hands at his side, palms skyward...

And this time I couldn't scream. But I didn't freeze. I let my .38 scream for me. It's much more direct, anyway.

The rifle blasted—Murray fell to the ground—the figure spun and slid down the rocks backwards—I ran to Murray. The woods seemed suddenly shocked into life. There was noise everywhere. I knelt down next to Murray. There was a great fear in me, and I think I prayed again.

He lifted his head and spat woodchips from his mouth. "What, may I ask, is going on?"

I gave thanks, though I've no idea why.

I helped him to his feet and led him over to the man from the cliff. He lay at the bottom of the rocks, his rifle ten yards away. He wasn't dead, just shot a good one in the shoulder. I praised my marksmanship and chalked one up for me. I went to get the rifle; Murray lifted the man's head.

It was our client—the "dead" Mr. Walter Dewbury.

**L**ieutenant Quise had the rest of the story. He sat in our office, blowing cigarette smoke towards the ceiling. I had the greatest urge to walk over and gag right in his face.

But I didn't. I'm too polite.

"It was Walter Dewbury's brother Milton who set the whole thing up," the lieutenant explained. "Him and his girlfriend, that is. With the both of them crying like babies for candy, we've pretty much got the whole story. Pretty old motive, too. It was Milton's brother's fortune, and Milton got an allowance, but he needed more."

Or just wanted more, I thought. Quise was right, surprisingly: it was pretty old.

"So Milton stole a painting from his brother's private collection—"

"Meaning," cut in Murray, "stolen paintings or at least illegally obtained paintings for private viewing."

"Bingo," said Quise. "That was how Milton was sure his brother wouldn't call us in. Anyway, after stealing the painting, Milton demanded one hundred thousand dollars' ransom. He used his girlie for that bit. Now get this: his brother was going to pay it. Can you believe that?"

"So then why'd Milton kill him?"

"Because," he took a long drag on his cigarette; I wanted to see him explode, but no such luck, "his brother began to have suspicions about who had stolen his painting. And on the morning of the swap, he confronted Milton with them. In other words, he accused Milton. So Milton killed him. And had a big problem on his hands."

It's called a stiff.

"No money," said Quise.

That, too, I guess.

"As a result, he came up with the idea of getting his brother's life insurance and, of course, his inheritance. A sizable sum. So he decided to go through with the dropoff and make it look like his brother had gotten shot trying to cross the thieves. He used you guys to confirm the setup with the painting."

Murray turned to me. "When you handed the painting over to Milton acting the part of Walter, the body must have been in the trunk."

I nodded. His deductive powers did not surprise me.

"Well," said the lieutenant, "that's about it. What I want to know is what tipped you off?"

"Al?" prompted Murray.

I shrugged.

"He's being modest," said Murray, and he went on to answer for me. He likes that. "Two



points actually got him going. The first, Walter—or rather, Milton—Dewbury told us the painting was an impressionistic piece by Monet. Fine. But before that he had mentioned it was Italian. Al's a good listener, he doesn't miss much. Well, at the time it didn't register. But Al knew Monet was *not* Italian. Now, either Mr. Dewbury had made a mistake—quite understandable—or he didn't know what he was talking about. Which happened to be the case.”

“I can see that,” said Quise, nodding and pursing his lips in concentration. “Yes, I can definitely see that.”

He's a swift one, he is.

“Secondly,” continued Murray, “at the dropoff Dewbury's girlfriend did not check the contents of the briefcase, even though Al checked the painting. Now, why?”

“Because she already knew what was in it,” answered the lieutenant adeptly.

“Exactly,” said Murray, tapping his fingertips together again. “Exactly. Now, who was

the only person who knew what was in the case? Knew that it was only cut newspaper?”

Murray should have taught kindergarten.

Quise frowned. “Dewbury?” he ventured.

“Perfect.” Murray slapped his palms. “Dewbury and the girl had to be working together. Al concluded that the dropoff had been set up to cover the murder of the real Dewbury. Now, of course, he had no idea it was Dewbury's brother behind it all, but he did know that whoever it was would rather kill me than have me give the umbrella to Dewbury's wife, and have her tell me she had never seen it in her life. That would have set us sniffing. And that they didn't want, by any means.”

“Interesting,” said Quise. He looked at me. “Nice job, Al.”

I shrugged. I hadn't been paid for anything, mind or leg work, after the swap, so big deal. Of course, I still had Murray. I glanced at him. He grinned and winked. Some payment, I thought.



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FICTION

# Graphic Proof

by Thomas Wylde



*Illustration by Nick Jainschigg*

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**K**arl Weller grunted and strained and hefted the color television onto the windowsill, banging it down hard. His heart pounded crazily, his forehead oozing sweat into his eyes. He stopped and listened to the sleeping house. Faint snores came from the bedroom, and he relaxed a bit. Then a large white cat jumped onto the TV and scared the hell out of him.

He slumped for a moment, leaning over the TV. He felt dizzy, almost sick. The cat began to lick the sweat off his neck. "Thanks for your concern," he said, prying it loose.

He went back for the VCR and got tangled in a bunch of wires going to video games. He ripped at them, holding his stubby penlight in his mouth, grumbling louder and louder. The snores stopped abruptly and a man grunted in the next room. Karl sucked the penlight into his mouth and froze, listening to bedsprings.

When it was quiet he relaxed slightly, and light peeped from between his teeth. Then the bedroom door banged open and he nearly swallowed the damned thing. A man in boxer shorts came out swiftly and passed Karl on his way to the kitchen.

The refrigerator opened with a tinkle of bottles and Karl heard the guy pop the top off a

beer or something. A moment later the man passed again on his way back to the bedroom, his head thrown back as he gulped the beer. (It was beer—Karl was close enough to smell it.)

The bedroom door slammed shut and a woman in there yelled, "What's that?"

"What's what?" the man said, making the bedsprings squeal.

"I heard a noise!"

"Go back to sleep."

"Well, if you're not man enough to look—"

Karl heard the springs again, spat the penlight out, and swore rather loudly. He yanked the VCR loose and trotted to the window, knocking the cat and the TV off the sill into the bushes.

"There!" the woman yelled. "You must have heard that!"

"It's just me, for chrissake. I got a beer!"

The bedroom door banged open again and a light came on.

Karl dropped the VCR, dived out the window, and started running. The once friendly cat grabbed onto his left leg and bit his ankle. He shook it off and belted on down the street to his car, empty-handed, dogs barking, the woman screaming, lights coming on up and down the road.

He jumped into his heap, spent several breathless mo-

ments trying to jam his trunk key into the ignition, then got it right, gunned the motor, and burned his clutch plate all the way to the end of the block.

His heart was thumping like an old washing machine. Which way was the freeway, left or right? He couldn't remember!

He tried right, went two blocks, found nothing, and did a bootlegger one-eighty in the middle of the street.

He found the freeway at last and tromped the gas going up the ramp as a prowler car came blitzing off the cloverleaf, lights flashing.

The freeway at three A.M. was empty. He tore into the glove compartment, digging for the Valium, and wished he hadn't dropped the damned penlight. In the back of his mind was one tiny thought: I gotta find another way to make a living.

**K**arl waited quietly in the cubicle for the personnel director to come back. He squirmed around on the plastic chair. His butt itched.

Everything he wore was brand new, from his shoes and socks to his haircut, all of it bought especially to make a favorable impression on the interviewer, to ease him into this job, into any legitimate job. It was time to join the straight world.

He started to cross his legs and discovered a latent pin in his new boxer shorts. He froze, sucking air through bared teeth, his right leg suspended oddly in mid-crossing.

Karl knew he looked ridiculous in this pose, so he swallowed hard and swung his leg into position. There was no further pain . . . until he relaxed.

"Uh," he said, then coughed to cover the sound.

The pin was back.

He tightened his muscles again, and the pinpoint retracted slightly.

A minute later his tensed muscles were trembling, and Karl was having trouble focusing his eyes.

Nervous sweat dampened the new white dress shirt, exciting a stench that reminded him of dried blood and made him dizzy. His ears were ringing.

From outside the cubicle came the barely muted clatter of a dozen electric typewriters. Somewhere a phone rang and went unheeded. The place was a madhouse.

This just wasn't his world.

Abruptly the sound level jumped to a new plateau, then dropped. The personnel director got behind his desk and scowled behind large, black-rimmed glasses. He held the application by one corner, placed it on the desk, and shoved it at Karl.

"Is this the application you filled out half an hour ago?"

Karl's right leg was quivering uncontrollably. He jerked it off his left knee and slammed the tight fitting shoe to the floor. "Uh," he said, as the pinpoint came and went.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Yes, sir," Karl said. "That's mine."

The director nodded slyly. "Read block 23."

Karl took the form and began to scan it.

"Page two," the man snapped.

Karl folded the page back and read block 23, his lips moving slightly.

"Out loud, you idiot!"

Karl looked sharply at the man over the top of the application. "I don't think you have to yell."

The man smiled nervously.

Karl quickly calculated the effects of decking the geek, and found the results unsatisfactory. He sighed. Welcome to the straight world.

He read aloud: "My name is Karl Weller. I live in the city, and I want to get a job in your factory, as night watchman. I come from Nevada. I spent some time in the army and I had lots of jobs of all kinds, also auto mechanic for a while. I'm healthy and strong and I think I can stay up all night watching without much problem. I need

a job real bad, but I'm not begging you or anything, so just please be fair and let me know what you think.'

"There you go," he said, handing back the application. "How'd I do?"

The man took the paper by one corner and placed it on his desk. "Do you want to hear how I read this?"

Karl shrugged, taking the opportunity to rub his aching leg. "Sure."

The man frowned at Karl and began to speak, barely glancing at the paper. "Today I'm calling myself Karl Weller, but tomorrow it could be anything else. The address I gave you is probably a vacant lot. My main ambition is to get into your factory one night and steal everything in sight. I got kicked out of the army after a couple of months, and I've spent my life in one petty crime after another. My morals are rooted in sewer slime, and I'm prepared to do anything to conceal my true nature in order to victimize and exploit you. I AM SCUM!"

The director tore off his glasses and stared at Karl with palpable contempt.

Karl didn't know what to say.

The tiny office began to rotate rapidly to the left, and the angry buzz of clattering typewriters swelled.

He was so dizzy he could

hardly stay in his seat, and his mind had stopped dead in its tracks to examine one simple question: How could it be that his face was soaking wet when his mouth was dry as shredded wheat?

"Graphology," the man said smugly.

"What's that?"

"The psychological analysis of handwriting."

"Handwriting?"

"You know, penmanship." The man scribbled the air with an imaginary pen.

"Oh."

"The study of handwriting is becoming more and more common in personnel offices around the country. And it's a good thing, too, because you might easily have fooled us in the old days. But you'll never con anyone again."

"I wasn't trying to con you," said Karl. "I want a job is all."

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

"It's all here in black and white. In your own hand."

"It is?"

"It most certainly is, Mr. 'Weller.' You have the most depraved handwriting I have ever seen."

**K**arl stumbled out into the street, blinking in the strong sunlight. It was almost noon, and

his stomach growled demands at him. He'd come away without breakfast, in his frenzy to dress and groom himself for the appointment, and he knew that wasn't healthy. Now none of it made any difference. Not the job, not his rotten health, not any of it. All he wanted to do was find some dive and pour beer down his neck until he was good and dizzy for a reason he could understand.

Instead he went into the men's room at a filling station and stuck his head into a basin of cold water.

After half a minute he came up for air and stared at his dripping face in the mirror.

Was it true? Did he really mean to rob the place?

Was he lying to himself?

He grabbed a handful of paper towels and went outside and sat down on the concrete in the sun to dry his hair. What the hell kind of world was it when you couldn't go straight if you wanted to? What were they trying to tell him? That he was only fit to burgle and transport stolen goods?

Well, damn it, that just didn't make sense. Because if he was really cut out for that kind of life, why the hell was he tormented by anxiety attacks?

Karl rubbed his head with a paper towel. His hair reeked of barbershop tonic.



The more he thought about it, the more he hated it. He was being squeezed between what he had to do and what they wouldn't let him do. It just wasn't fair.

A little yellow butterfly zig-zagged by, turned erratically, and collapsed on the toe of his new left shoe. He watched it open and close its wings, which were still damp from the cocoon.

Behind him, two women clicked by, talking confidentially.

"Listen, Randa, I know creeps when I see one."

"I can change him," said Randa.

"Change him? Not in this world! He's scum! He's slime! He's..."

The rest of their conversation was lost in the rumble of traffic. Karl twisted around to see what they looked like, suddenly convinced they were talking about him, but they had disappeared. The butterfly started up and fluttered away, headed for the busy intersection.

He watched the yellow flake climbing and diving in the turbulent air above the cars. A red diesel tractor cab lurched by, its twin stacks blowing hot black columns of smoke. Karl groaned as the butterfly disappeared into the cloud, but an instant later the yellow chip re-

emerged, dropped a few feet, then recovered its course to the gas station on the other side.

Karl smiled, leaned back against the wall, and had an epiphany. That butterfly could never have crossed the street if it had stayed a caterpillar. . . .

Suddenly he leapt up and ran to the phone booth on the corner. "If he can change, I can change," he muttered, pawing his pockets for coins. "I have to!"

**H**e found the office in the Rox San Medical Building in Beverly Hills. Henry P. Romack, Clinical Graphologist. The receptionist had told him over the phone how lucky he was to secure an appointment on such late notice. Dr. Romack would see him at one thirty sharp.

Karl was a few minutes early. The blonde receptionist gave him *Time* magazine and resumed painting her nails. "I'm not back from lunch yet," she explained. Her cool, silvery beauty charged him with confidence. Between photographs of newsmakers, between frosty lavender nails, they exchanged businesslike smiles.

Now this was a whole new world, a world he could get to like. He settled comfortably into the couch.

The pin was gone.

The doctor strode in at one thirty as the second hand crossed twelve and swept Karl into the office. He was sharp, dressed impeccably in gray, a tall man with a professional smile. They got right down to cases.

"Mr. Weller," he said, "please sit down and write me out a sample. You won't have to tell me anything more about yourself. I get everything from the handwriting."

Karl smiled and addressed the cool white paper with determination. He could already feel the improvement.

He handed the page to Romack, then settled back in his leather chair and looked the office over. It was darkly paneled in oak and walnut, the walls studded with framed samples of the handwriting of celebrities. The joint had real class, and when he noted the bit of modern sculpture in the corner, he didn't even wonder what Jack's Al-Nite Pawn Shop would grudgingly fork over, no questions asked.

He followed his gaze around the room until it returned to the man behind the desk.

Henry P. Romack, meanwhile, had undergone some sort of change. He was pale and shaking, his eyes open wide, his strong jaw now limply hanging. Karl's writing sample had

dropped to the desk, and his hands lay twitching on either side. There was a low groan coming out of him.

"What's the matter, doctor?"

"You swine!"

"What?"

"How dare you come into my . . . Get out!"

"You want me to leave?"

"Get out, get out, get out!"

"I don't get it. Can't you help me? You knew I had a problem when I made the appointment." Karl was getting mad. "God-damn it! It's your job to help people with their handwriting!"

"You are not people, you are scum!"

"My sample—"

"I'll have it burned! Do you think I want this piece of filth festering in my office? My clientele is genteel, famous, tops of their professions, stars of stage, screen, and TV. How do you think they would like it if they found out I was helping the likes of you? No, no, I can't afford to take that chance. Get out of my office this instant!"

In the crowded elevator Karl ripped at the plastic bottle, spilling several Valiums on the floor. He grabbed them up—viciously slapping shoes aside—and gobbled them down, his head spinning like newspaper headlines in an old movie. He got shakily to his feet, climbing hand over hand up the

rope of a fat woman's fox fur, then backed into a corner, drenched in sweat, his eyes clamped shut against the nauseating world.

**M**idnight in the alley. Karl edged deeper into the gloom, sliding along the rough brick wall, banging into trash cans, and stepping on sleeping winos. Ahead of him a dim slit of yellow light showed the way to the door. He reached the spot and felt around on the wall for a buzzer. He encountered a plastic-covered cardholder, flicked a disposable lighter, and compared the number with the one on the scrap of paper in his hand.

This was it.

He pushed the buzzer but heard nothing.

Several minutes passed. Karl pressed again, then turned to go, his heart sinking. That piece of paper had cost him fifty bucks.

Abruptly the door opened a crack.

"Who are you?"

"Karl Weller. Are you the man they call . . . the Doc?"

The door opened wider in answer, and Karl slipped inside. It was almost as dark in the hallway as it was in the alley. Before him stood an old man, dressed in shabby brown tweeds, patched with tattered vinyl.

The man needed a shave and a haircut, but Karl wondered if such surface changes could ever reclaim him. The desperate red eyes radiated a history of irredeemable failure, as if he'd spent his life performing unsavory experiments on human glands. His breath was intoxicating at a distance of several feet.

"Follow me, punk."

They wound down a series of forty watt hallways to a glass paneled door bearing the words BOB'S HOUSE OF CHEESE.

"Is your name Bob?"

The old man made a noise of contempt. "Don't you know a front when you see it?"

"I wasn't sure, is all."

"Inside."

The room was dark except for a fluorescent lamp that spread a pool of glaring white light onto the cluttered desk. Books and papers were stacked on the floor in precarious, five foot piles. The old man went directly to the desk and pulled out a pint of supermarket whisky. He gulped down several swallows and put the bottle away. "Here," he said, crackling a piece of paper, "write something. Write: the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs."

"Why that?"

"What?"

"Why should I write that, about the fox and the dog?"

"Who's in charge here, punk?"

Karl lowered his head. "Sorry."

"Write what I tell you, then."

Karl bent over the desk. "I just don't want to start out on the wrong foot."

"You worry about your handwriting, punk. Let me worry about the feet."

Karl sighed and started to write. He was nervous and sweated over every letter. He wanted to get it right, but when he came right down to it, he still had no idea what was wrong with the way he wrote.

"It's got every goddamn letter of the English alphabet," the Doc said. "That's why."

"That's why what?"

"Forget it! You finished? Give it here."

Karl gave him the paper and held his breath as the Doc scanned it. The old geezer began to cough consumptively.

Karl swallowed hard. "Can you help me?"

The Doc looked up, his face bloated and eerie in the white lowlight. "You are one foul little punk."

Karl winced. There it was again, like a pronouncement from God. "Can you help me? I'll do anything!"

The Doc quickly got out his bottle and killed it. "By Godfrey," he said hoarsely. "What a challenge!"

"Then you'll do it?"

"I don't believe I've ever seen worse than this. It's... it's positively vile!"

"But... you can help... can't you?"

The Doc wiped his mouth and picked the sample up. He screwed on a jeweler's eye and bent over the page, whistling a long descending note. "This is really incredible!"

"What am I doing wrong?" Karl asked, leaning forward.

"Stay away!" cried the Doc, one of his terrified red eyes widening in the magnified aperture of the loupe.

Karl slunk back a few feet. The Doc waved the paper. "I hardly know where to begin." He pointed a tremulous finger at the page. "That sinuous baseline, the lack of spontaneity, those ovals open at the base, these bizarre arcades, misplaced i-dots, and weak t-bars, reversed final strokes, and—my God!—distorted lower loops!"

Karl began to collapse into himself. It was just too much! For the first time his handwriting began to look sinister to him, too. How could he possibly reconstruct this mess? It was all too hopeless.

The Doc threw the paper down and sighed. "Well, punk, we've got a lot of work ahead of us."

Karl's face brightened. "Then you will help me?"

The Doc took a deep breath, his eyes wandering. "My toughest case. Jesus!" Then he fixed Karl in a red-rimmed stare. "First thing: you give me three C notes, up front. Second thing: you run down to the all-night market and get me a quart of rye whisky and some paper cups. Third thing: clear the next two weeks for intensive study and writing practice."

The Doc stood up as straight as he could and clasped his hands in front of his chest. His eyes glazed over and his lips trembled. "By Godfrey, I'll do it! I'll do it! I'll have you writing like a Supreme Court justice! I can feel my strength returning! By Godfrey, look at that!" He held up his hands, fingers extended, and sighted off the tips. "They stopped shaking!"

**T**he weeks passed swiftly as they worked amid a growing heap of empty coffee cups, discarded sandwich wrappers, chicken bones, and cigarette butts. Karl wore down three dozen number two pencils, hardly scuffing their erasers, never looking back. The Doc tirelessly examined and critiqued every page, every word, every telltale stroke. He kept the best of each day's work in a folder, comparing them at intervals to survey the progress.

And there was progress, decisive progress. As Karl labored under the harsh white fluorescent lights, his baselines straightened out and his ovals closed up on the bottoms and began to rupture at the tops. He crossed t's and dotted i's assiduously, and learned a style of careless precision that genuinely surprised the Doc. His lower loops were exquisite!

At two in the morning of the last day, the Doc finished looking over the final sample. His toothless smile was triumphant, though somewhat repulsive.

"This is absolutely beautiful!"

Karl leaned back in the chair and took a long drag on his cigarette. "I owe it all to you, Doc."

"Of course you do, of course," he said absently.

"My life is opening up in front of me, Doc."

"I just knew I had it in me."

"Even my double vision is better!" Karl said, smacking himself on the forehead. The room spun once to the right and stopped.

"I have many useful years in me yet," said the Doc.

"Of course, these things don't go away overnight," Karl said, putting on his coat.

"Times have been hard in the past."

Karl folded up his best writ-

ing sample and put it in his pocket. "I can go straight now, I know I can."

The Doc rubbed his face and frowned. "I could take a shave and get myself cleaned up. Make a new start."

"I'm as good as my handwriting, and now that's perfect!"

"You know, I wasn't always as you see me now."

Karl grabbed one of Doc's floating hands and squeezed. "So long, Doc. I'll never forget what you did for me."

He went to the door and paused, looking back. The Doc was staring off into space, muttering about dentures on credit.

Somehow the little office seemed less squalid now, filled as it was with a tantalizing atmosphere of hope, with the delightful scent of freshness, of setting out on new paths, of finally getting it right.

"Doc! Doc!"

The old man looked up. "You still here?"

"I just thought," said Karl. "Maybe it's not just my handwriting, you know? Maybe I just don't . . . present myself right. Do you think you could give me some pointers? How to dress and talk and everything?"

The Doc stepped back into the shadows. "What do you think this is, *My Fair Lady*? Get out of here, punk, and don't come back!"

Karl nodded, backing out of the room. Well, what did he expect? This was a business arrangement, right?

He walked wearily down the hallways. But though his body was dragging, his spirit continued to soar.

"My life begins tonight!"

**H**e knew he couldn't go back to the first company, but there were plenty of others to try.

He marched confidently into the personnel director's office and shook that man's hand firmly. "It's a real pleasure, sir," he said. "A genuine pleasure."

"Have a seat, Karl."

"Just give me that application blank," he said. "I'll show you some handwriting that'll knock your eyes out!"

"Handwriting?"

Karl nodded. "Handwriting."

"I don't understand."

"You know. Penmanship."

Karl wrote on the air with his finger.

The man's face broke finally into comprehension. "Oh, no, we at Consolidated don't go in for that sort of mumbo-jumbo. We believe in a scientific examination of the man himself."

"Is that right?"

"Don't forget that handwriting can easily be modified."

Karl stared. "Easily modified!"

"Besides, Karl," he said with a wink, "altering one's handwriting would be proof enough of a man's dishonesty. Graphic proof. Don't you agree?"

Karl was having trouble focusing on the man. "I suppose so."

His head had begun to buzz. There seemed to be a powerful fate operating here. Was he truly meant to be dishonest?

"Let's begin, shall we?" said the man. "Just lean forward and put your nose on this mark."

Karl obediently leaned forward. "This mark?" he said, his nose approaching the surface of the desk, where a small red and

yellow bull's-eye was painted.

The personnel director slipped his hands lightly over Karl's skull.

"Uh-oh," was all he said.

Dr. Ronald Rand, Clinical Phrenologist, edged back from the quivering pistol pointed at him. "You gotta help me, doc," Karl said, his eyes going in and out of focus on rack upon rack of ugly silver mallets. The place was surely a torture chamber of Hell.

Well, that didn't matter now. He was pushed to his limit.

"It's the bumps, doc! My God! Now it's the bumps!"

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FICTION

# Eliminate the Negative



Lindsay Hall



Laurie Hall

by Nancy C. Swoboda

**T**hat first year was a pip, all right. My old man had taken a walk and there I was with little Francie, barely two. My only skills were cooking, cleaning, and growing things. Lucky for me, that was just what the folks at the girls' junior college wanted. They hired me to run The Cabin.

The campus is big with lots of old trees, and off the courtyard there's a nice path through the woods that leads to The Cabin. It's just that, built of logs with living quarters in the back. Up front is one big room with tables and booths and a horseshoe-shaped counter behind which I do all my cooking. There's a jukebox and space for the girls to try out the latest dance steps.

The girls come up, order, and carry their food back to the tables. Since the college is out in the country, The Cabin is someplace to let off steam or have a hamburger when you're tired of the dining room food. It's sure a good spot for me, my own little acreage and the work's not hard. Gives me time to garden and keep the outside looking real pretty.

It didn't take long for the girls to feel comfortable with me, call me Melva and start requesting their favorite dishes. My burgers were the main hit, but I always had a little menu on a chalkboard with other hot dishes like chili or goulash and two kinds of pie. Whenever hardboiled eggs in tomato sauce (eyeballs in blood, the girls called it) turned up on the dining room schedule, there was standing room only at my place.

Don't ask me how it got started, but I'd say it was partly the students and partly because I enjoyed doing it that some of the smaller classes started coming to The Cabin for a special session now and then. They had to let me know ahead of time, of course, but it was real interesting. I even picked up a few things just by listening.

The Spanish teacher was Professor Adkins, a middle-aged bachelor with blond hair and blue eyes. But I had to chuckle at the way he tried to look kind of slick and Latin. He had pointy sideburns, always wore a string tie and a big silver belt buckle. You couldn't see his little thin mustache unless he'd had his upper lip in a chocolate malt.

Well, anyway, he'd bring his advanced class of twelve down and they'd play bridge, but speak only in Spanish. I'd serve tamales or nachos or something like that. He liked to sashay from table to table, listen in, watch the hand being played, and make the girls giggle with his little remarks. I never did understand bridge, but

I felt real good to think I got the hang of their foreign talk.

Professor Stewart was something else. He taught journalism and put on quite a show. With the space over by the jukebox as a stage, he'd have two or three of the girls act out a scene while the rest of the class watched and made notes as if they were reporters covering a story. Then the sparks would fly.

"Too wordy, no opening hook, opinionated, boring!" He'd fire off comments after each of his students read her article aloud. What he liked to do best was pace back and forth in his expensive tweeds and lecture them on the finer points of journalism. He was small, goodlooking, and in his late forties. I had my own idea about some men that size and their egos. He fit right in.

Now, from him I learned that you use as few words as possible after choosing the ones that hit the nail on the head. Also I knew I pitied his wife. He was always picking fuzz off his jacket and straightening things at his table, and he even went over to my chalkboard once and corrected my spelling of rhubarb pie. Bet a nickel he graded her housekeeping and had her iron his T-shirts!

Then there were the Dolly sisters, as I called them. These two girls were in both classes and they really did look enough alike to be sisters. Joan Weston was a trim little blonde with wide blue eyes, very quiet and sweet-natured. She seemed unaware of her beauty. The other girl, Lindsay Hall, could fit the first part of my description of Joan, but the rest was something else.

The way Lindsay wore her clothes and makeup she could have given Lana Turner a run for her money. She was going to college on a scholarship so you knew there were brains behind the mascara, but one look into those little sapphire eyes told me she was plenty smart in a lot of other ways.

I was hoping some of Joan's influence would rub off on her instead of the other way around, and I took to watching them two as the semester went on. They seemed to hang together like each needed something from the other. Lindsay especially sort of enjoyed having Joan tag after her like a little puppy dog.

You'd be surprised how much I know about life on campus without even leaving The Cabin. Over the sizzle of my grill the old ears still hear plenty. There's something about sitting down together at a table with a cup of coffee or a plate of food that makes people confide or spill a little gossip.

Most of the faculty had been there for years and had their own comfortable ruts, dull ones according to some of the girls. But about

mid-semester Miss Pritchard, the riding instructor, fell and broke her leg. Well, they didn't have to shoot her, but while her bones knitted they brought in a substitute by the name of Brad Alton. Then the girls had something new to whisper and giggle about. And he was something, all right. Reminded me of Rudolph Valentino in jodhpurs.

It was funny the way all of a sudden the riding ring drew a big spectator crowd. Those that were in his classes compared notes on how Mr. Alton helped them mount their horses. I could sum that up in two words: grab ass. I watched him at The Cabin while he watched the girls, and I hoped they were all smart enough to steer clear of the barn. When my Rufus took over the stables a few years later, things sure changed for the best, in more ways than one. But that's another story.

Fall was beautiful that year. The leaves turned and hung onto the branches for a long enough time to enjoy the reds and golds. I took Francie for walks in the woods and thought about how my grandma used to do the same with me. She knew every flower, weed, and tree by name and passed it along to me. Now I had a chance to do the same for Francie.

Autumn was also the time for the faculty tea. I didn't look forward much to getting all gussied up, but the event was going to be held at Professor Stewart's house and I was curious to see how he lived and meet his wife. According to what I'd heard, she'd brought the money into the marriage.

Faculty Row was set back in a grove of trees at one corner of the campus. There were twelve nice two story salt boxes for families and married couples on the teaching staff to live in, while the single ones had rooms in the main building.

It was a bright crispy Saturday afternoon when I walked up to the Stewarts'. Mrs. Stewart was at the door to greet the guests. She was a small woman with a face like one of them cherub candles you see at Christmas that are too pretty to light but after a time the features fade and get soft anyway. She acted shy, but I liked her firm handshake.

She showed me into the dining room where the table was all set up with a big silver service and platters of fancy foods. I helped myself and looked around before I joined the bunch in the living room.

Just like I figured. Everything was spit and polish, and expensive. There weren't a lot of gimcracks around, either. "Functional"

is the word I think they use when each thing serves a purpose else you won't see it there.

When I crossed the hall into the living room, Mrs. Stewart was standing there watching her husband with a little smile of pride on her face. The professor was hopping around like a cricket in a gray flannel suit emptying ashtrays, wiping up wet spots, and carrying on a conversation about the rights of news broadcasters at the same time. No one was really listening.

I shook hands with Dean and Mrs. Owens, chitchatted around a bit, and went back to the dining room to get Francie one of them pretty little cakes. A couple of the girls from the college were there, helping Mrs. Stewart. They kept the trays and the urns full. While I was wrapping the cake in a paper napkin, Professor Adkins strolled in.

He'd been in the living room holding an empty plate. Now he was back for seconds, bending over close to them two girls and asking them what was good. I swear, his aftershave lotion would have cleared up the world's worst sinus condition. When he saw me giving him the fish eye, he left with a red face and no plate.

During the winter, class sessions at The Cabin weren't as regular. The girls had to bundle up for the walk and it took too much time away from the hour. Business was still good, though. My hot chocolate and chili were best sellers in the cold weather.

I noticed that Joan and Lindsay didn't pal around as much then. Joan would come with some of the other girls or a date on Saturday night sometimes. Being just plain nosy, I asked her about it.

"Here's your burger, Joan. Say, I miss seeing you and Lindsay together. Everything okay?"

She shrugged. "As far as I know. Lindsay's been off by herself, hitting the books a lot. Being here on a scholarship, she's worried about maintaining her grades."

"Hey, that's right. Exams are coming soon, aren't they?"

Joan made a face. "Don't mention it, Melva. You'll spoil my appetite."

It was that time of year when everything was buzzing. The girls were jittery before exams and twice as bad after, wondering if they'd passed. I suppose it was good to have Christmas vacation to follow. Everyone would go home, get some fresh air in their petticoats, and come back ready to tackle another semester.

A lot of things happened before the holidays. Professor Stewart got some big literary award and an offer to become editor of a

newspaper back east. It seemed to be the break he'd been hoping for. Judging from the talk, the girls in his classes were only sorry that he wouldn't be leaving until the end of the next term.

Just from watching him run his classes here at The Cabin, I knew he was a real stickler for detail, but I guess he really came down hard on the girls in grading their exams. He took off points for every wrong or missing kind of punctuation and a dozen other nitpicking things. Thanks to his red penciling, some averages took a nosedive.

Brad Alton was the one who'd be missed. After Christmas Miss Pritchard would be back in the saddle, her leg as good as new. No more cosy sleigh rides and stolen kisses in the barn, and the riding students looked pretty glum. It was probably just as well. From what I'd seen and heard, Alton was quite an operator. At a girls' school, that could spell trouble.

Along the same track there was another little incident that made me snicker. Lois Dunn, the housekeeper, told me about it. Seems while she was dusting outside the dean's office she heard one of the students complaining about Professor Adkins' touching or patting the girls in his classes. Lois tried to see who it was ratting on him and wasn't sure if it was Lindsay or Joan.

Her beady black eyes snapped. "The registrar was coming and I didn't want to get caught with me eye to the keyhole. But whoever it was, I'll bet old Professor Steal-A-Feel will get a proper dressing down."

A blanket of snow and the new semester came on the same day and the college settled down to a quiet winter routine. It beats me where the time goes but the next thing you know a lot of little green buds was poking their way up through the slush, and it was time for the spring festival. That was always real nice.

They decorated the arch over the wide front steps of the main building with flowers, and the choir stood underneath to sing. Then there was a fancy string quartet and the choosing of the festival queen. When Dean Owens put the little gold crown on Lindsay's head, I thought she looked especially pretty standing there in the sunlight, softer somehow. And wouldn't you know, Joan was her lady-in-waiting, the runner-up.

That was in April. You could feel a hum in the air about that time, and it wasn't the bees looking over the new crop of flowers. Final exams were coming around again, the graduates were planning their futures, the faculty was planning what to do during



vacation, and me and Francie were looking forward to a quiet summer in our woods.

They had a big write-up in the town paper about Professor Stewart's new position, but he seemed more nervous than excited over the whole thing. I figured maybe he didn't think he could handle being thrown into a bigger pond where the other fish would bite back.

I guess Professor Adkins had been keeping his hands to himself. Lois Dunn came sputtering in one afternoon for a sociable cup of my herb tea to announce that he'd been invited to return the following year.

"That snake," she blustered. "Why, I can say for a fact that when I cleaned his rooms he had a whole collection of those turrible girly magazines. The man's sick. You mark my words. There'll be trouble one day, and he'll be at the bottom of it!"

Well, the trouble came soon after. Lindsay Hall turned up missing. I remember it was the first week in May. The whole campus was in an uproar. She had one of the single rooms and they found everything was still there, just like she'd stepped down the hall for a minute. Dean Owens called her mother, but she hadn't heard from Lindsay in weeks.

Montrose is the nearest town down the highway, and Sheriff Cotter is the law there. He was called in and the first thing he did was to organize a search of the campus, the buildings, and the woods. Not a clue was found. He and Dean Owens talked then and decided to put out a bulletin on Lindsay.

The girls weren't too helpful on where she might have gone. Like Joan said, Lindsay had turned into a Greta Garbo. There didn't seem to be a reason for her to run off. Her grades were in the top ten percent, and the scholarship she'd earned wasn't in any danger of being taken away.

Sheriff Cotter stopped in for a cup of coffee. His usual broad grin was a straight line and he looked tired.

"I don't like the looks of this, Melva. That girl's come to no good." He pushed back his hat and stirred three spoonfuls of sugar into his mug.

"Could somebody have picked her up on the highway? The girls like to walk into Montrose sometimes."

"Maybe. Pretty little thing by her picture." Cotter motioned for a coffee refill. "Come on, Melva. You hear plenty around here. Give me some ideas."



"Well, I don't think Lindsay was dumb enough to do what I just said. If you want my opinion, she's a smart cookie, ambitious. Have you talked to Joan Weston yet?"

He flipped the pages in his notebook. "Hmm. Nope. Who's she?"

"Probably the one girl who knows Lindsay as well as anybody could. Let me call up and see if I can get her to come down and talk to you here."

Joan's eyes were red around the edges and she was pale, but she was anxious to help.

"Lindsay and I were close for a time, but then she changed, kept to herself a lot."

"That was about at the end of first term, wasn't it?" I shoved a cup of hot tea in front of her.

"Yes. I knew she'd had a rough life and she told me it wasn't going to be that way any more."

"What do you think she meant by that?" Sheriff Cotter asked.

"She was on a scholarship, and the way she started hitting the books, studying alone, I figured she wanted to get a good education so that she could be self-supporting."

Cotter wet a big thumb and fanned through his notes. "Yeah. Here it is. Professor Stewart mentioned that he thought Lindsay was pushing herself too hard. One more question, Miss Weston. Did Lindsay have any boyfriends?"

Joan gave a wistful little smile. "At first she did date a lot, could have taken her pick. But then, I don't know. Like I said, she sort of cut herself off from everything."

The big blue eyes were beginning to fill up, and I leaned over to pat her arm.

"Joan, what do you think really happened to our girl?"

"I . . . I wish I knew. It's as if Martians just came and took her away. I'm so afraid for her, Melva."

Sheriff Cotter sent Joan on her way and let out a sigh. "She's got *that* right. I haven't a clue of what to do next."

"I don't know your job, sheriff. It's sort of like sifting through the crumbs on a table to try to figure out what was served for dinner."

By graduation time Lindsay was still missing. Everybody'd been questioned up one side and down the other. Searches went on, posters were sent all over. Sheriff Cotter was like a bulldog with a sore paw. He kept at it and got madder every time he ran a lead down to nothing.

I did a lot of soulsearching before I told him about Brad Alton and Professor Adkins, but with their taste for females and the mystery at a standstill, anything was worth looking into. Alton was never located, and it *was* Lindsay who'd told Dean Owens about the Spanish professor's touching habit. Nothing came of either one.

The seniors had their cap and gown doings then, and the faculty began packing up for the summer. Still no trace of Lindsay. The Cabin was closed and Francie and I began our little vacation. It was on the morning after we'd had a big thunderstorm that we took a walk in the woods. Everything smelled fresh and earthy and the birds were singing their heads off.

Mother Nature's full of tricks and she doesn't play favorites. It was on the way back that I saw the fallen tree. There'd been a lot of wind with the storm, and the big old elm had gone down for the count. It left quite a hole where the roots had pulled up the earth, and I stopped Francie from getting too close. The flash of color against the dirt was what caught my eye. After a closer look I grabbed Francie by the hand and I don't think her feet touched the ground once between there and The Cabin.

Sheriff Cotter and his crew arrived ten minutes after my call. I took them out to the spot.

He shook his head. "Perfect place for a grave. The ground around that tree is soft and scrubby. A person could cover up any traces of digging real easy."

I left then. Didn't want to watch. Poor Lindsay. She'd been out there all this time. My mind started going around again. Why had Brad Alton made himself so scarce? Was Professor Adkins mad enough to kill her because she'd reported his groping? That wasn't something a teacher would want in his file.

Sheriff Cotter called me late that evening.

"Just thought you'd want to hear it, Melva. Of course we all knew it was Lindsay, and Doc says she's been dead about a month."

"I was looking at my calendar thinking about that. It was May fifth when she disappeared. How did she die, sheriff, or can't you say just yet?"

"No. That's okay. She was strangled, probably from behind with something like a belt or strap. But that's not all Doc found."

"Oh?"

"Lindsay was almost three months pregnant."

Well, that threw me for a loop! I told him my thoughts then on

Brad Alton and Professor Adkins. The belt or strap thing made me think of riding tack. I even broke down and threw in the fact that the professor read girlie magazines, which made Sheriff Cotter snort a bit.

"Melva, you don't miss a trick. But I want you to know we've had an APB out on Alton for some time, and we've been keeping a close eye on Professor Adkins. They're both suspects now, more than ever since we have a body."

I didn't sleep very well that night and the next morning I decided a batch of waffles would cheer me up, just watching Francie tie into them. About the time I'd finished wiping the syrup off of her and the table Lois Dunn showed up. Her eyes were like two shiny buttons, and I knew she wanted to hear all about the murder.

"Morning, Melva. I brought you down your copy of the yearbook. There's a right nice picture of you standing in front of The Cabin."

"Sit down, Lois. Here's a cup of coffee and I'll get a waffle going for you."

I don't think she even tasted it, she was so excited. When she left I had to snicker at the way she walked up the path in little fits and starts, peering around every tree close to her before she'd pass it.

It was a real pretty day so I took the yearbook and a mug of coffee and sat out on the front porch while Francie played in the grass with her blocks. Of course I went and turned to my picture first. Lois was right. I liked it just fine. Made me look thinner.

The seniors all had big smiles, and it listed their activities and major under each picture. Then I turned to the juniors. It gave me a funny, sad feeling to see Lindsay's face, but she looked happy, confident. Why had she been killed? Who felt she had to die? I looked at Francie, so innocent there playing in the sun, and said a little prayer.

All the activity stuff was last in the book. There was Alton with some of the riding students, perched on the fence and looking smug and handsome. There were pictures of the spring festival with a little inset of Joan Weston as the queen. I supposed she had to take over as runner-up. Well, I closed it then. Maybe I'd enjoy it more some other time.

That night I kept dreaming about Lindsay standing up there on the steps. She was wearing the crown and waving to everyone. The next morning she was still with me. I remembered how pretty she'd looked and thought now maybe it was because she was pregnant.

Two lives had been taken, and I sure hoped justice would be done.

It must have been about a dozen times that I pushed that yearbook out of my way while I was dusting before it hit me right between the eyes. I opened it, found what I needed, and placed the call. Three questions answered and I knew the murderer, at least I was pretty sure.

There was fudge cake and fresh coffee waiting for Sheriff Cotter. He said he'd be over right after the arraignment. We settled ourselves in a booth. He took a big bite of cake and smiled.

"Melva, there won't be any crumbs of this left over, but you sure sorted out the ones our killer left around."

"It just had to be. Lindsay disappeared on May fifth, and who was to say *that* soon that she wasn't going to turn up, that maybe she'd just gone off by herself for a day or two? No cause to make Joan Weston Spring Festival Queen."

"The printer's testimony really sewed it up, all right."

"Yep. When I called him he told me the yearbook was delivered to him on May seventh for printing. Said Professor Stewart had complete charge of the final layout and always prided himself on everything being letter perfect. There were no last minute changes, either."

"You mean like replacing Lindsay's picture with Joan's." Sheriff Cotter leaned back thoughtfully. "Stewart almost went into shock when I confronted him with that. I don't think he realized until that moment what he'd done."

"Wouldn't be surprised. He was under a strain, and he's such a perfectionist that I'll bet his neat little mind just automatically put Joan's picture in the yearbook since he knew the truth, that Lindsay wasn't ever coming back."

"Lindsay wasn't a very nice girl, Melva. She took up with Stewart and when she found herself pregnant, she threatened to ruin his career, his marriage. His wife has all the money, so he couldn't even buy her off. That's what she wanted."

"She wanted a better life. I can't help but feel sorry for her. And then there was Stewart. He had to correct everything. Couldn't help himself. Say! Almost forgot. Did you ever find Brad Alton?"

"Yeah. He's motorcycling through the French countryside."

"God help the farmers' daughters! Oh well, have another piece of cake, sheriff."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Photograph © by George Gerster, Photo Researchers, Inc.*

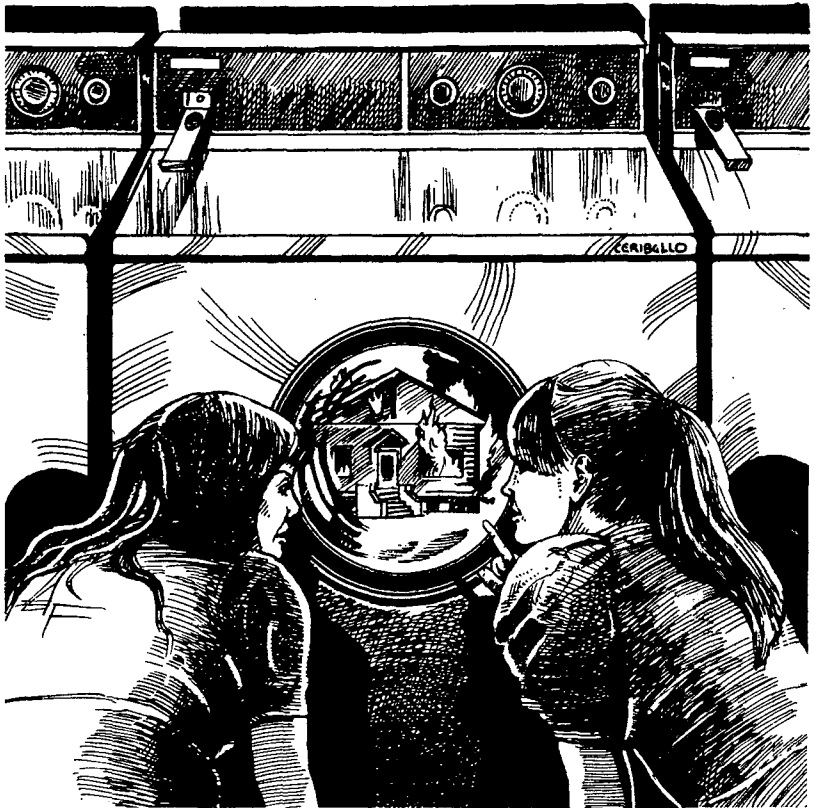
This is unreal. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# He Told Her at the Laundromat

by Jule Selbo



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“Gillian,” I said, “you’ve got to stop staring at that old house. You’re going to turn into a huge nose and no one will ever ask you for a date or even to go swimming at the creek on a Saturday afternoon. You know nobody likes nosy people, ’specially here in Accord. People get shot and run over with a pickup truck for just looking at a person wrong, let alone what you’re doing.”

She didn’t listen to me. She turned around and gave me a big “Sssshhhhhh!” and went on looking. I know she was waiting to witness the murder of Harriet Brewers, the meanest woman in the county.

I was making dinner for Gillian, Mom, and me. I don’t like the taste of most vegetables but I like the taste of lemons, so I normally make potatoes with lemon butter sauce and peas with lemon butter sauce and beets with lemon butter sauce. Mom used to complain her lips had a constant pucker, but since she couldn’t be home to make dinner any more, what with her job at the correctional facility in Napanoch, we all just puckered and lived with it. So I had a big stack of lemons in front of me to be squeezed. I took the first one and put it on the table and then pressed all my weight on it and rolled it up and down the table a few times. This seems to get the juices really flowing, makes ’em easier to squeeze, too. Then I cut ’em in half the short way and press ’em against the green-glass lemon juicer thing we have with the chip on the handle. After I juice it real good, I pick the seeds out of the juice and pour the juice in another bowl and start all over with another one while I put the squeezed one in my mouth to suck on. The tang goes straight to the roof of my mouth and into my head and my eyes get wet for a moment. Then the sides of my mouth spring to life and my lips start to tickle and it gets stronger and stronger and just when I can’t stand it any more my lips give a loud smack open and I feel the tingle all the way to my toes. I really love lemons. I figured on making lemon hamburgers tonight.

“Gillian,” I said, “old crank George isn’t going to kill her tonight. He goes bowling Tuesday nights.”

Gillian turned around and glared at me. “If she gets murdered and there are no eyewitnesses to see it, you’re gonna be sorry. How would you like your murderer to get off free as a bird after murdering you in cold blood?”

We were sure he was going to kill her. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe that. It was going to happen. I just thought it wouldn’t be



tonight. "I bet you a quarter he just goes bowling and we see her feeding the chickens in the morning."

"You can't buy anything for a quarter."

"Okay. Fifty cents or one Snickers. Whichever I can get cheaper."

"It's a deal."

The reason we thought George Brewers, the biggest man in the valley, was going to kill his wife, Harriet Brewers, is because we heard him say it. Gillian and I were down at the laundromat watching the clothes dry and hoping Frank and Ryan Anderson didn't notice our first bras spinning right against the glass. I could never figure out why underwear always turned up in front of you when you didn't want it to. Like when you load the washer, you never drop a shirt or a pair of jeans on the floor when you shove the clothes in, you always drop a pair of panties or your first bra or, worse yet, your mom's bra right next to yours on the floor and you realize yours looks like a molehill compared to Mount Everest, and then you look up and Frank and Ryan Anderson just happen to be sitting on top of the washing machine at the end of the row, staring at you. I figure life is just made up of embarrassing moments like that to test you. To see if you can learn not to blush.

So, Gillian and I were watching the dryer and Frank and Ryan were playing videogames and talking macho real loud so we could hear them. Then George Brewers came into the laundromat and went over to the candy machine. He put in two quarters and nothing came out. So he kicked the machine. He must be at least forty years old, but he still kicked it. Harriet had come in after him and had gone to the bathroom. When she came out, he was kicking the machine. She said something like "Why don't you grow up, George?" And then looked at us with her mean eyes like it was our fault.

He said something like "What did your big yap of a mouth say?" He sounded mean.

She said something like "For God's sakes, don't you dare talk to me like that here. This is a public place. Don't you have any sense of privacy?"

He said loud and clear, "I don't care if the whole world knows I'm going to kill you."

And then he kicked the candy machine one more time and shoved the laundromat door open and left. He got in their pickup truck and started it by flooring it. He put it in reverse real quick and squealed out of the parking lot. Harriet was left standing on the

concrete floor of the laundromat. Her face was real red. Frank's and Ryan's quarters had run out and they didn't know what to do so they just stood in front of the videogame moving the joy stick around like they were still playing. Gillian and me were staring at her. Not that we knew we were staring at her till she said, "What are you staring at, you skinny girls?" Then we realized we'd been staring and we looked back to the dryer real quick. She left then, and after a moment I looked around and saw her walking up the road towards her house. She had about four miles to walk.

So Gillian had started watching the Brewerses' house. It had been three days since the day at the laundromat. Gillian tried to stay awake all night the first night, to watch, but she'd finally fallen asleep about two o'clock in the morning, she figured. So we were pretty worried the deed had been done and Gillian'd missed it, but bright and sharp at six thirty A.M., Harriet had come out of the house to feed the chickens.

And she did the next morning and this morning, too. I guess the time just was never right for George to do it. Or else he was planning.

Anyway, I said to Gillian, "Mom isn't going to let you stay up another night. She said she told the sheriff all about it and if something happens, everyone will know it's George's doing anyway. And maybe Mom's right. Maybe they just say those kind of things all the time and don't really mean them."

"He meant it."

I had to agree with Gillian. He sure sounded like he meant it.

Suddenly there was a bright light coming from the Brewerses' driveway. Two headlights. I said, "See, he's going bowling."

The pickup drove down the long driveway, then turned to go down the hill towards town. There were lights still on at the Brewerses' house.

Another set of headlights was coming up the hill. "Mom," I said and I realized I was behind schedule on dinner. I started mashing up the hamburger and scraped the inside of the lemons to get the clear squiggly stuff that sticks in your teeth out of them and put that in with the meat. Then I squeezed some juice on it, too. Gillian was getting Mom's soda out of the refrigerator and pouring it in a tall glass with lots of ice. I ripped open a bag of chips and dumped them in a bowl. Gillian got Mom's pillow from the couch and put it on the rocker in the kitchen, and we were all set, just as Mom walked in the door.

"What a day, what a day. You girls, I want you to go to college and learn computers the easy way." Mom was learning to run the computers at the correctional facility, and whenever someone started beating up on someone else, she had to run and try to get them to stop. So half the time, she said, she'd be on the brink of learning something and have to run to take care of some lady pulling another lady's hair out and by the time she got back to the computer she'd have to start all over. "Gillian, you haven't spent all day watching the Brewerses' house, have you?"

"No, Mom."

She was lying but I didn't want to get into it. I started frying the hamburgers.

"I hope not, Gillian, there are better things for you to do with your time than nosing into other people's business." Mom put her feet up on the table when suddenly there was a gigantic boom! boom! Like an atom bomb or something, I thought it was. I turned off the gas flame under the hamburgers and covered my ears. The sky got real yellow and then it got dark grey again. Mom got up and ran over to the window. Gillian was with her. "Oh my God." I looked out and saw the Brewerses' house burning like crazy. Mom ran to the phone and called the fire department and all I was thinking was, how hot was it? How hot was it inside that house?

Gillian started screaming like a wild banshee, "He did it! He killed her!"

Mom ran out the front door and started running down the hill. We ran after her. The closer we got, the hotter it got. I heard the fire alarm go off in town and I thought about all the volunteer firemen that were just sitting down to dinner and wishing that alarm wasn't going off. Mom kept running closer and closer to the house and we followed her, but it was getting real hot and she stopped for a moment, like she was thinking about what she should do. I caught up with her and I said, "You think she's still alive in there?"

"How do you know she's in there?" Mom grabbed me.

"'Cause it's his night to bowl and he left about ten minutes ago."

"He said he was going to kill her, Mom. We told you." Gillian was talking to Mom but looking at the fire. "I never thought he'd do it this way."

"Stop talking like that. No one has killed anyone, I hope." Mom looked back at the burning house. It was really just one side of the house, we could see now. "You girls stay here." She shoved us back

a little and started down the rest of the hill. "Don't come any closer, you hear me?" she yelled at us.

The fire sirens were getting louder.

"Mom!" I yelled. I couldn't stand watching her get close to that hot house. "Mom!" I started running after her.

The fire engines were climbing the hill, sirens blaring.

"Mom! Wait!"

She had reached the house, the side away from the fire. She started towards the door.

"Mom! Don't go inside!"

She went inside. I thought of the house falling down, I thought of another boom sounding, I thought of clouds and clouds of smoke grabbing her and dragging her down and I'd never see her again. I was running as fast as I could, my feet were landing on top of each other, I fell to the grass and it was dry and rough and hot. I got up and I was panting so hard my chest hurt. And then there it was. The house. Right there, like an oven. Mom had left the door open. I ran towards it and just as I was going inside someone grabbed me and lifted me up and I kicked and screamed to let me go! let me go! my mom is in there! I was handed to someone else who was even bigger than the first man and he carried me away from the house and told me to settle down, he had a fire to put out. He threw me into a pickup truck and closed the door and told me to stay put.

That was not what I had in mind. I opened the door and jumped out and ran towards the house. Someone tackled me and my nose hit the dirt. I jerked up just in time to see my mom dragging a body out of the house. She was all gray and dirty and she was stumbling as she took these steps backwards and her white shirt, even though it was all smudged and dirty, shone for a moment against the sky when a flame burst out from the door, right after her.

One of the big firemen took the body from her and another one helped her over to where the pickup trucks had parked. The fireman standing with his foot on my back said, "Is that your mom?" I said yes, and he let his foot up and I ran over to her.

Gillian was already there. Mom was leaning against the seat with her legs sprawled out the door onto the step. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing hard. Gillian took one hand and I took the other and Mom said, "I'm all right, girls, don't you worry."

I looked over to where the sheriff (who had come sometime, I don't remember seeing him come) and the deputy were standing

around the body. There was a doctor kneeling down next to it and it looked like he was doing things to it, so I figured the body was still alive. But I thought, George'll go to jail for attempted murder, at least. I thought I'd go over and tell the sheriff to go look at the bowling alley for the prime suspect.

Well, when I got over to the body, the sheriff was talking. "You're gonna live, George. We're gonna put you in a truck and take you into Ellenville so the doctor can look at you."

George! It wasn't supposed to be George!

Two firemen came over and lifted George up and walked him to the Accord ambulance that was sitting in the driveway. It was really just a twenty-year-old station wagon someone had painted white with a red cross on the back door and AMBULANCE printed in blue on the sides. One fireman got in behind the wheel and put one of those red turning lights on the top of the car just as they were putting George in the back on some blankets. Then they drove off down the hill and started the ambulance siren. It sounded a little kinder than the fire engine siren, like it was supposed to reassure the guy on the way to the hospital he'd be okay, instead of scaring everyone into thinking their house was on fire.

I went back over to Mom and Gillian. I said, "It wasn't Harriet. It was George that almost got murdered."

"No one tried to murder anyone, girls." My mom sighed. "Let's go home."

The fire was almost out. One side of the house looked like a roasted marshmallow that was cooked the way I like 'em cooked, kinda burnt on the outside. The other side was okay, just dripping with water. Smoke was coming out a lot, but there weren't too many flames left. So we got up to start up the hill.

The sheriff came over to us just then and thanked my mom and told her she had done a real brave thing. Mom didn't say much, she kinda smiled and said she hadn't really thought about what she was doing till it was all over. She looked real tired. Gillian and me got her up the hill, and she went right to bed. No hamburgers, no nothing to eat. We weren't too hungry, either.

The next morning I woke up earlier than everyone and looked out my window, down the hill. The Brewerses' house was sitting there, half burnt and all alone. I got up out of bed and put on my jeans and sweatshirt and walked downstairs real softly and went out the back door. I started down the hill. It was a quiet morning, the birds didn't even seem to be awake yet. I got to the Brewerses'

house. The smell was weird. It got in my nose and just stayed there. Maybe I had breathed in some ashes or something, but it was so strong I could taste it in my mouth, too. It smelled like when Gillian had put the plastic wrapper of a pop-tart into the toaster, thinking that was the way to do it, and it melted right inside on the hot coils. The house was so quiet and black and charred looking I almost didn't dare go in.

But I did. I don't really know why.

I was in the living room, I guess. There were wet chairs sitting on the floor and someone had rolled up the rug and started to carry it out and then had just left it, half in and half out of the room. There was a mirror on the wall and it was cracked now. There was mud all over the floor.

I walked into the hallway leading to the kitchen. It was only half there. There was a closet, the door was off its hinges and burnt, and the walls looked blown away. I could see through the ceiling into a bathroom upstairs. Everything was roasted looking and wet. I took a step towards the closet. One of the boards under my feet broke, and I had to grab onto part of the wall so I didn't fall into a hole. I took another step, this time testing the board first before I put all my weight on it. I was right next to the closet. I don't know why, but I looked inside. There were a few hangers holding onto a metal bar that was still connected on one side of the closet. It looked like it was gonna fall any moment. On the floor was a jacket, or what was left of one. It was made out of that plastic material stuff and it was black and both of the sleeves were melted and shriveled. But I could still see the lettering on the back of it. It said BOWLING. Right next to the jacket was a vinyl bowling ball bag that looked like it used to be red and white, but now was streaked with a brown creepy melted look. The lower half of it was shredded and the bottom was completely gone. The top was opened. I looked inside. There was the bowling ball.

Or, really, half of it. The three finger-holes were still there. And the top half of the ball. But the bottom half was gone. Right underneath it was a thing that looked a lot like the mechanical things that I figured a bomb looked like.

"What are you doing here?"

I knew, even before I turned around, it was Harriet. I took off, running. The only way away from her was into the burnt part of the house. The boards were breaking under my feet, but I was going so fast, my feet didn't have time to fall into the holes. Some

boards from the ceiling had fallen in the kitchen and the Formica kitchen table was set in the middle of the room and I had to climb over them and jump on the kitchen counter and leap over the burnt outside wall of the house to hit the outside and start running up the hill.

My head was down and I was running as fast as I could. I didn't hear the sheriff's car coming at me down the driveway. I crossed the driveway and was going to jump over the ditch to run through the field to get home when the deputy grabbed me and we both fell to the ground right in a prickly bush. The deputy yelled loud, in pain, but I was too scared to do anything but try to get away. He held onto me.

Harriet had gotten into her pickup and was trying to get around the sheriff by driving into the field. She got stuck in the ditch, about twenty-five yards from me. She just sat in the truck, staring straight ahead, and she looked madder and meaner than I'd ever seen her.

The sheriff found the bowling ball bag and what was left of the bowling ball in Harriet's shopping bag on the floor of the truck. He told Harriet there was a jail cell waiting for her. He told me to go home.

So I did. Mom and Gillian were just coming downstairs to get some breakfast. I told them what happened. They didn't believe me at first, but then they looked out the window and saw the sheriff leading Harriet to the sheriff's car. Even from our house a person could tell Harriet was upset. She kicked the side door of the sheriff's car a few times before he managed to get her inside.

I started rolling the lemons on the table and taking orders for eggs, scrambled, fried, or poached. With or without lemon butter sauce.



# The Stone Man

by John F. Suter



Pete Bender never thought of the phrase "living rock" as a literal one, although he had heard it and understood it. It was the medium in which his father had made his life's work, as had other ancestors. Pete, himself, had planned his life to carry on the tradition.

Four other men worked for him, but for Pete the tradition and his line were about to end.

With one of the tools of his trade, Bender had slain his wife, who had never presented him with a child of either sex.

Bender, a spare man with a lean face, intense blue eyes, and jet black hair, did not fit the image of Hercules as a stonemason. Perhaps his wife Marie, a hoydenish type only one generation away from France—as Bender was from

his own native soil—had thought this herself.

"You build fine houses for the rich," she was fond of saying. "But do you bid on the fancy buildings for the city government? The exclusive club-houses? The bridges in the city parks? No. What's wrong with you?"

Pete sipped his wine and bestowed a faint smile. "Aren't you living comfortably?"

"Comfortably, yes. Excitingly, no!"

Anyone could have written the script from then on. It ended on the day when Marie and Pete arrived home late within minutes of each other. Pete was sorting his tools at the back of his truck when the red Ferrari stopped to let Marie out. It roared off as she teetered in Pete's direction.

Bender eyed her with disgust. "What is it?" he said, biting off the words. "You're not worth enough for him to see you to the door? Or can't he look me in the face?"

She tried to toss back her hair, but the effort of lifting her chin was too much.

"Not afraid of you," she muttered. "You wouldn't make two bites for him."

Pete was holding his favorite knapping hammer. He hefted it. "That one, he wouldn't have any teeth to bite with."

Marie tried to focus her eyes on the tool. "You know something?" Long time ago, you cut yourself a hunk of granite and stuck it in your chest. Where most men have a heart. No blood in you, either. Just water 'n a sludge of granite dust."

"A home," Pete growled, "what kind of home have you ever made for me?"

"Who could make a home outta . . . maus—mausoleum?" She swayed, spilling words. "I need to be warmed."

Once Pete had wanted to create for her something beyond anything a man had ever made. He remembered this now and mentally saw it washed away like a sand castle by the sea. Warmth he had provided, to excess. Suddenly, it was all too much.

His arm came up, almost unbidden, and he hit her with the flat of the hammer. Four times, each blow on a different side, her head turned with the force of every stroke.

When he stood over what was left, he passed his right hand over his face and groaned. Then he went into the house to the telephone.

To his surprise, his call was answered.

Gathering his will, he said, "This is Bender. You'd better call the police. I've just killed your whore."

“**M**ay I fill your glass again, judge?” Arthur Price asked, gesturing in the direction of his visitor’s right hand.

Judge Whiteman stirred in the depths of the leather chair. “I’d like that, Art.”

Price, a successful lawyer still some years away from becoming an Institution, walked across the family room to his bar. “Have I told you we’re thinking of a new house?” he said casually.

Judge Whiteman, a John Doe sort who donned distinction with his black robe, looked about him. “Hunting a place to spend it, is that it? I’d be satisfied with this, myself.”

Price added water and ice to the scotch. “It’s been quite comfortable, but frame has always bothered Anne. New paint job every few years, this and that. She’d like for us to go to stone.”

“Lower upkeep, I’ll agree,” the judge said, accepting the glass. “Initial outlay—you can afford it, I’d say. Who would do your stonework?”

“That’s the problem,” Price said, sitting in the companion chair opposite. He smoothed his graying hair. “You’re about to sentence the man I’d hoped to get. I’ll probably have to hire somebody from out of town. There’s nobody else anymore.”

Judge Whiteman sipped. “Bender? He didn’t operate all by himself. Get his crew. They might come up with somebody to head it.”

“I thought of that, but they feel that they’d need someone with Bender’s business sense and eye for the finished product.”

The judge mused. “A pity that his father had to die twelve years ago. That old Italian—” He paused. “Or was he Austrian? He changed his name before he came here. Could it have been Benda? Or Bendt? No matter.”

“As you say, no matter,” the lawyer said impatiently. “What sentence are you going to give Bender?”

Judge Whiteman stared into his glass. “I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

Price consulted his own drink. “It’s a pity to make a talented person’s services unavailable to the public. Under the circumstances, I might have done just what he did.”

The judge looked up. “I have never explored what I think you’re hinting. But why not? Other judges have done it.”

“It might not be too popular.”

“With whom?” the judge asked. “Oh, with Jules Vernet, the wife’s brother—of course. And maybe with that hunk of sleaze who precipitated it all.

I wonder why Bender didn't split *his* skull? Can you think of anyone else?"

"Some of the unpredictable public. Those who've seen Marie Bender's picture but who never knew her."

Judge Whiteman thought it over. "I try never to let the public influence me. Still, careful thought seems to be indicated."

**J**udge Whiteman had called two persons into chambers before he sentenced Pete Bender for the second degree murder of his wife, Marie. One was Bender himself; the other was Jules Vernet, a wide-shouldered, barrel-chested worker of wrought iron. Where Bender's darkness ended at his hair, Vernet was black of eyes and beard, as was his scowl.

The judge, now robed, was, to his visitors, the unquestioned embodiment of the law. He looked first at Vernet, seated on his left.

"I have requested both of you to be here," he said, "because what I intend to say in court will be unusual. Mr. Vernet, I don't want you in there unprepared because I don't want you upsetting the dignity of my court."

Vernet's milk-white skin flushed. "I respect the law, your Honor."

The judge rubbed his chin.

"I'm sure you do. All the same—"

He turned to Bender. "What sentence are you expecting?"

Bender shrugged, expressionless. "Not for me to say. You're the judge."

"Mr. Vernet. Any opinions?"

The red was fading on Vernet's cheekbones. "I'd throw the book at him."

Judge Whiteman nodded. "Understandable. She was your sister."

He clasped his hands and looked down at them. "The evidence would indicate that Mr. Bender acted in a moment of blind rage, after some provocation. He should, of course, have checked himself. He is not known to be a violent man, according to those familiar with him. He is also recognized as being especially talented in his work. Unfortunately, the penal system in this state has no outlet for his talent, even in hard labor.

"On the other hand, when Mr. Bender is sent to prison, this community will lose the services of a very skilled person. True, he has been well paid for those services. And one way of looking at his incarceration is that the citizens of this state will be paying handsomely to keep him locked up, his talents no longer available for anything constructive.

"In recent years," he contin-

ued, looking up, "the courts have taken a careful look at certain criminals: hit and run killers, embezzlers, perpetrators of various types of involuntary manslaughter, and others. They have decided that justice is better served by allowing them to remain outside prison, dividing their time between continuing with their normal lives and devoting their energies to a public service. This permits their families to survive and society to benefit."

The judge looked directly at Bender. "I have decided that this is what I shall require of you, Mr. Bender."

The stone contractor's voice was husky. "Thank you, Your Honor. It's better than I deserve."

"And *that's* an understatement!" Vernet roared. He leaped from his chair and started for Bender. "I'll kill him now and take my chances!"

Judge Whiteman had anticipated this and had already pushed a buzzer. The rear door burst open, and two husky guards rushed in. Vernet had barely reached Bender before they seized him and dragged him aside.

"Mr. Vernet!" the judge snapped. "Now you see why I wanted this private session. Set him in that chair again," he directed.

When things had quieted, Judge Whiteman addressed the room in general. "I'll now finish this discussion. Mr. Bender will be permitted to take up his business again. But, there are two things he is required to do, and others might be added later.

"First, the county wants to build a small nondenominational chapel in memory of its citizens who died in the Korean and Vietnamese wars. They prefer that the material be stone. You will undertake this contract. Your men will be paid. You will not. Your efforts will be a public service. When this is finished, there might be more.

"Second, you are to build a memorial obelisk for the woman you murdered."

"She's already buried, with a good headstone over the grave," Vernet interrupted.

"The column will be set in one of the divider islands in one of the cemetery drives," the judge said. "It will be an honor, sir."

He turned back to Bender. "You will be given a sketch of the obelisk. You will be furnished with the materials you specify. You are to do the entire erection of the column yourself. There are certain rules you must follow."

"Anything you say," Bender agreed.

The judge continued. "You

will be permitted to lay the pavement around the base at your own pace. However, you are to construct this column with stones no larger than ten inches long by six inches in each of the other dimensions. These stones can be irregular. You may lay only one stone a month. The last act will be to fix a simple bronze plaque to the face of the column. It will read 'Marie Vernet Bender, February 17, 1943-June 6, 1973.'

"When you complete the column, your sentence will be served."

Bender had listened attentively and with growing interest to the conditions of his sentence. From the moment of his arrest until an hour ago, something had been dying within him. Not to be shaping stone would reduce him to zombie status. Now he would be at least almost whole again. He truly mourned for Marie—the Marie of the day they married. He privately felt that the Marie he had killed had enough memorial already.

"I have some questions, Your Honor," he said.

"Go ahead."

"For this column—what kind of stone?"

"Sandstone, limestone, granite—it makes no difference."

"I should have said 'which style.'"

The judge frowned. "Dressed, quarried stone." He studied the stonemason. "Are you trying something, Bender?"

Bender shook his head. "I'd have preferred rubblestone, but I'll follow directions, Your Honor."

"Rubblestone!" Vernet snorted. "Plain old fieldstone. Even now, he hasn't any respect for her!"

"I'll make it so that even you will be proud of it," Bender said.

"That's another point," Judge Whiteman interrupted. "Mr. Vernet will be one of three inspectors of your handiwork. He will be critical, but fair. We shall see to it that he is."

Bender whistled between his teeth. Then he said, "Is the column to be hollow or solid?"

"Solid."

Bender's eyebrows raised.

"Are these requirements unsatisfactory?" the judge asked. "If so, I have an alternate sentence ready. It's the customary type."

"Quite satisfactory, Your Honor," Bender said, avoiding looking at Vernet. "At least, to me."

**A**fter Judge Whiteman had pronounced sentence in open court, Pete took steps to adjust his life to the new pattern imposed upon it. He cleared the house

completely of any influence Marie had ever imposed upon it. This done, he found himself living in austere surroundings. He coped with them temporarily by closing rooms he did not immediately need and generated cash by selling discards. Vernet attempted to claim some of these things, but Bender ignored him.

In quiet moments, he made calculations about the column. It was directed to be no less than three feet square at the base, tapering to a point no fewer than six feet above ground. He was allowed to extend the square at the base or to increase the height if he wished.

When he had finished his estimates, he understood the judge's stipulations. He mentally bowed to the jurist or to his advisor, if one had been involved.

The construction, at one stone a month, would last twelve years.

He grinned. Unless—

There was no specification about the mortar.

He could use as many or as few stones as he wished, provided the workmanship was sound and pleasing to the eye.

His feeling of elation diminished. He knew that his pride of workmanship would not let him take absurd shortcuts.

He decided to count on eleven years, at least.

**T**he adjustment to a changed life was not easy. Bender found himself unwelcome in places where Marie had been favored, many of them not in the least cheap or tawdry. In the large, the congregation of his church shunned him, preferring to forget one of the teachings of their Leader. In the end Pete found religious acceptance by a mission doing no-questions-asked work in the lower stratum of society.

He did not look for friendship and companionship. His workers had not changed loyalties, and there were enough friends and acquaintances who remembered with disapproval Marie in her later years.

He had intended to begin on the memorial, both as a start to freedom and as a renewal of his personal bond with stone. Before he could do more than order a supply of sandstone from local quarries, Arthur Price had approached him about his new house.

Bender studied the plans before him on his work table.

"A well-designed house," he said. "It will be a pleasure to work for you, Mr. Price."

"You don't see any problems?" the lawyer asked, run-



ning a long finger down the edge of the table.

"Oh, no. You'll find us very adaptable. One thing: you don't need us to lay up the block for your foundation or inner wall. After all, the stone is the facing on the block. It might cost you less to have somebody like Miller Brothers do the block. We can do it all, of course, but we get along with the Millers. It's your money."

Price stood absorbed in thought.

Bender smiled. "Take your time, Mr. Price. Give me an answer later. We have plenty of other work, I assure you."

"I'm thinking of Zimmerman as the main contractor. Any ideas?"

"Good man. I don't know his feelings about me. We'll see."

Price rapped the edge of the table with his knuckle. "Well, if it's all right with you, I'll see about Miller Brothers."

"Sure." And good public relations for you, thought Bender. You'll be running for something someday. Spread it in lots of places.

The mistaken thought also came to him that Judge Whiteman was directing work toward him, to help him remain a useful citizen.

He frowned. In his mind's ledger, there was enough debit already.

The county was stalling on the memorial chapel, still arguing about small points in the design.

As soon as he realized this, Bender went to the cemetery, located the spot intended for the memorial, and measured it off. He arranged with the superintendent for removal of the sod for the base of the column. Then, when the grass was gone, he returned, dug and smoothed the ground, and poured footers.

The next day, he came back with boards he had sawn for the frame and installed them. Then he took the cornerstone he had already cut and dressed and carefully laid it, wiping away the small amount of excess mortar when he had finished.

It looked small and inconsequential, a token beginning of something a trifle would never complete. In Pete's mind it was different. Each stone would remind him of what he had done.

The base of the monument took him eighteen months. His first thought was to fill the center with concrete, without stone, but he feared the effects of expansion. A faulty job would tie him to this project for too long a time.

Price's house was long since finished, to his and Judge Whiteman's satisfaction. The

memorial chapel construction was into its second month.

The nineteenth month of the obelisk had come, and Bender had laid the first stone of the second course, tapering the edges of the outer face.

The day after it was laid, he received word from Judge Whiteman's secretary that the three-man inspection team would be looking at his work. Bender was asked to be present.

The request was a surprise. Bender knew that previous inspections had been made, but he had never attended and no comments had ever been made to him.

He arrived at the cemetery at ten in the morning. His ex-brother-in-law and two other men were already there.

Vernet looked at him when he walked up, then at the other men. "I guess we can start now," he said. He addressed Sheets, a weatherbeaten general contractor. "Why don't you look at it first, Bill?"

Sheets glanced apologetically at Bender. He clearly viewed inspecting one stone as a waste of time. He walked to the monument and bent over, peering at it.

"Looks like a good job of layin' to me," he said.

"Not lopsided? Is it good and firm? Go on, Bill, shake it," Vernet prodded.

The older man, looking even more sheepish, leaned over and began a half-hearted push at the stone. As mild as his effort was, it was too much.

The mortar crumbled, and the stone fell to the ground.

"Well, would you look at that!" Vernet bellowed. "Bill—you saw that. So did you, George. That's shoddy workmanship if I ever laid eyes on it. Did you think you could get away with this, Bender?"

Bender's mouth was set in a thin line. "It's been tampered with. Never in my life have I set a joint that didn't hold."

"Would you listen to him," his ex-brother-in-law hooted. "That was the story of my sister's marriage: cheap, skimpy, tenth-rate . . ."

"I'll re-set it this afternoon," Bender said. "If it's not like the Rock of Gibraltar tomorrow, I'll quit my business."

"You won't quit until the whole job's done," Vernet roared, shaking a big finger. "And you won't put it back until next month. It counts as another stone."

"But—"

"Another stone. Ask the judge."

Bender glanced at the other two men. "Hey, you guys, you know me. You know my work. Ever know me to do anything like this?"

Both of them avoided his eye. Sheets muttered that anyone could have an off day. "You'd have caught it next month, I'm sure, Pete," he finished.

Bender said nothing. He picked up the stone and drove off with it, thinking hard all the way.

When he reached his supply shed, he went to the materials that had been specifically furnished for the construction of the column. He ignored the stone pile but headed for the bags of sand, lime, and cement. He put samples from each into separate small bottles.

An hour later, he was at Vernet's place of business. He found the man in the workroom where he shaped the wrought iron. A hanging lamp in the last stages of construction was getting attention.

"What do you want?" the heavy man demanded. "You come here whinin', wantin' me to get you off the hook?"

"Not me," Bender replied. "I just took samples of some of my materials over to Elementals Labs for analysis. It wouldn't be too hard for some switching to have been done. And I think it happened."

"You lookin' at me?"

"Not necessarily, Jules. But you have to admit, I might think I should."

Vernet picked up a hammer

and hefted it. Bender wondered if he was going to work with it or was making a threat. "Yeah, I can understand. To me, you'll always be a bastard. Marie was my kid sister, and you could have done a lot of things other than killin' her."

Bender looked about him. Several large charts illustrating different styles of calligraphy were taped to the walls. "What are those? You taking up fancy writing on the side?"

The change of subject surprised Vernet. "No. I got a contract for puttin' rails on fancy balconies on a house for Dave Grinstead. They want alternate initials worked into 'em, his and hers, to match their handwriting. I got these for study and practice."

"All right," Bender said. "I'll put it this way: I don't think you'll use spot welds when you put initials into Grinstead's rails. Do you think I'd do cheap work on Marie's monument?"

Vernet gave him a long look. "No, Bender, I don't think you would, believe it or not. I don't know what the lab will tell you, but I've not touched your stuff. But that doesn't let others out."

He turned to lay the hammer down, then he glanced back at Bender. "Or maybe somebody had it done."

Later, Bender learned that

powdered chalk had been substituted for his lime and a mixture of barytes, carbon black, and a trace of cement (for odor) for his cement. He got rid of the bags and put his own materials in their place. The problem never recurred although once, two years later, the entire upper surface of the older construction was soaked with an oily substance that prevented new, water-based mortar from adhering. Bender restored the surface with paint thinner and a wire brush, then laid the next stone successfully.

No incidents ever occurred on his private jobs or with the chapel.

**T**he years passed without any other bother. Once a fresh bag of cement set up a month after being received. Since Bender still used his own supplies on the monument, this was no problem. He did suspect that water had been injected into the bag with needles, but he returned the bag without comment and got a fresh bag.

Four years after Marie's death, Bender met an attractive blonde, Louisa Trubar. She was twenty-eight, born in Slovenia, Yugoslavia, but a resident of Maryland since early childhood. She and Bender met at a beach in Virginia, found

they were decidedly compatible, and married. The union was happy, and their first son arrived fourteen months after the wedding.

Not long after the wedding, Bender met Sheets, the contractor, on the street.

"Hey, Pete," the older man said, thumping him on the shoulder, "I hear you got something nice at home now. Congratulations."

Bender thanked him, and they made small talk.

"How's your ex-brother-in-law taking it?" Sheets asked.

"Hasn't said a word," Bender replied. "Hardly his business, is it?"

"Well, no," Sheets admitted. "He's of Corsican descent, isn't he? Aren't they supposed to harbor grudges?"

"I don't know. Are they? Louisa's people had a hard time in World War II, but she's not about to cut down on any Germans."

Sheets spat into the gutter. "I never could figure out if he was madder at you or Judge Whiteman over your sentence. He had his back up with the judge even before that, I guess you know."

"No, I hadn't heard."

"I guess it came to a head while you were waitin' for trial. Jules' father had bought a nice piece of land out in Overbrook,

before Jules was born. About five acres. He kept it up, but he never did anything with it. When he died, Jules inherited it. He had his own place, so he figured it for an investment. So it would have been, if any new industry would be wanting to move a small unit here.

"At the same time, the school board was starting to think about a new gradeschool, but they were unaware of this land. Judge Whiteman knew what they wanted, and the Vernet land was well situated, so he talked them into considering it. They ended up getting it."

"But didn't Jules get a fair deal?" Bender asked.

"Oh, yes, but you know the board can use eminent domain. They did. Jules didn't get anything like he might have otherwise. He couldn't dicker. He's pretty bitter about it."

Sheets added an afterthought. "I heard rumors about commission."

Bender grimaced. "I don't even want to guess who got it."

**E**leven years and seven months passed, and the memorial was all finished except for setting the paving and fixing the plaque.

Bender, now the father of two boys and a girl, worked harder on the last day's stonework

than he had on any of it. This was the pavement around the base, where he was permitted to work at his own pace, ignoring the number of stones. He worked with a steady rhythm, truly enjoying it and realizing that it had been worth the doing.

I destroyed a person, he thought. Not a nice person. But I had no right to make that judgment. Maybe this was the way to make me realize it. God, forgive me. Then this other thought: Marie, forgive me.

The pavement completed, he went home. Next week, the plaque would be installed.

The next day, he drove by the site to have a look, to see if any final changes should be made.

As he wound his way among the headstones, the columns, and the occasional small tombs, something seemed odd. The general panorama was changed somehow. Bender could not explain the feeling.

Then he rounded the last turn before the three-sided island where the monument stood.

Had stood.

Nothing was there except a barren square spot surrounded by a larger area bare of everything except sand. A shower of stone chips and chunks of mortar covered the grass and part of the cemetery drive.

One of the cemetery workmen was shoving the debris on the paving into piles with a pushbroom.

Bender, shaken and unbelieving, climbed from his car and walked over to him.

"What in God's name happened here?" he asked.

The workman, a short, sinewy man in navy jeans and khaki work shirt, slowed his effort without stopping completely.

"City. Couple fellows come by with a big pickup and some sledgehammers. Busted 'er up but good, flung it all in the truck, and hauled it away."

Bender knew the man was not involved, but he had difficulty restraining himself from physical assault.

He finally calmed. "But why?" he said.

"You better go see Keller," the man answered. "They showed him some paper. I never saw it."

Bender wasted no more time but went to the superintendent's office. To his relief Keller, who was in charge, was in.

The superintendent was an average-sized man with a long face. He wore striped coveralls and a railroader's cap, from which gray hair straggled. He was sorting work slips when Bender came in.

"Hello, Pete," he said. "Guess

I don't have to guess why you're here. Sit down?"

"No, thanks," Bender said. "How come, Sam? You know how many years' work have gone down the drain?"

Keller leaned back. "I do. Can't tell you how sorry I am. But they came here with a fistful of papers, and there was no way to argue."

"Papers? What kind?"

"An order from Judge White-man that the monument was to be torn down. It had been inspected and found in a deteriorating condition."

"Deteriorating?" Bender shouted. "That shaft would have stood up to a nuclear bomb!"

"Woulda said so, myself," agreed Keller. "But they had a copy of an inspection report, and deteriorating's what it said. Signed by Bill Sheets, Jules—"

"I know who signed it," grated Bender. "And the shaft's gone, so I can't stuff the lie down their throats."

He stood cursing under his breath. "Not that it matters, but what did they do with the stone?"

Keller rubbed his chin. "Probably took it to use in the base for the cut-through between First and Clark."

"No good to me, anyway," Bender said. "I'll have to start all over."

"Maybe they won't ask that

of you," Keller remarked.

"But they will," Bender growled. "You can count on it, they will. I should have seen this coming, years ago. I heard a legend when I was a kid. A guy in hell, rolling a rock up a hill. Just as he got it to the top, it always rolled back down. That's what they set up."

When he left, he went home. His chest felt as though it contained the stone that Marie had said it did years ago.

When he entered, his house was empty. That suited him because he wanted to be alone for the moment.

He began by calling Sheets.

"Bill. Pete Bender. What's this about a bad inspection report on my monument?"

Silence met his question. Finally Sheets spoke. "Pete, I'm not sure I heard you right. Inspection report? What inspection report?"

"The one that made Judge Whiteman order them to tear down Marie's column. The one you three clowns signed. And don't give me any innocent crap. A guy saw a Xerox of the thing."

"Pete, I swear by anything you want to name that I don't know what you're talking about. I never even saw such a thing, let alone signed it."

"You swear?"

"I swear."

He hung up, his hands shak-

ing and his thoughts racing. The actual work on a new column was small, measured by time consumed and labor done. Its weight on his spirit was as of the Earth itself.

His memory went back to the time he had seen Vernet about the earlier bad inspection. He replayed the scene—the business with the hammer, the calligraphy charts—

Forgery would not be too difficult for a man with a good eye. Signatures—easier on paper than in iron—?

A rage began to build in him, the sort of thing that had not happened for nearly twelve years.

Bender went to his home workshop, looking for his knapping hammer. He was unable to find it.

He left the house and went to his business storage and tool shed. He searched for the hammer, but it failed to turn up even there.

"The bastard's own tool," he growled. "Better yet, I'll use that."

Before he left he picked up a pair of heavy rubber gloves, worn when smoothing large areas of mortar. He threw them into his car and drove to Vernet's house.

There was no answer when he rang the bell of the sprawling ranch-style dwelling. He



was not surprised. Vernet was childless, and his wife spent much time on community projects.

He walked to the rear, to the neat aluminum shed where Vernet worked. The door was locked, but Bender was surprised to find no deadbolt or guard. On a chance he took from his pocket a multi-function tool that contained key chain, pocket knife, and other useful implements. He opened out a sturdy nail file and applied its point to the lock. In seconds he had it open.

Vernet's workroom was a collection of articles in various stages of construction. Bender went through them, looking for a hammer. He found a small sledge, considered picking it up but decided to wait until he had determined to confront Vernet.

As his attention wandered, a new thought began to build in his mind. It had not been Vernet who had conceived his punishment in the first place. In fact, his ex-brother-in-law had been antagonistic to the judge, as Sheets had said. And Vernet had made vague hints when the poorly laid stone had been found.

Bender noticed that he stood by a telephone extension, with a directory beneath it. He picked up the directory, found a number, and punched it in.

After one ring, a woman's

voice answered. "Judge Whiteman's office."

"Is Judge Whiteman in?"

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "Judge Whiteman will not be here during the next three days."

"Is he in town? I'd like to reach him."

"You might try his residence. I don't believe he's away."

Bender thanked her and hung up. This was better than he had hoped. Whiteman was a confirmed bachelor, living in his family's spacious old house. If he were there, he might be in a relaxed mood, less alert to possible trouble.

Bender put on the gloves and carefully edged the hammer onto an old newspaper, then wrapped the tool in the paper. He did not want anyone aware of what he carried, least of all the judge.

It took only twelve minutes to drive to the judge's house, a large, red brick, ten room, two story on a hillside overlooking the city. A five acre lot surrounded it, well maintained by a crew that came once a week. A cleaning woman gave the inside minute attention bi-weekly, but the judge employed nobody else. He dined out.

Bender walked to the steps leading up to the wide porch spanning the front of the house, the wrapped hammer tucked awkwardly under his left arm.

He mounted the steps and crossed the porch, trying to organize his approach. It might be well, he finally concluded, to come to no decision until he saw a lead.

He rang the bell and waited. There was no response. He heard the chimes reverberating in the hallway.

His mind came alert. The sound was not muffled. The door—

He looked closely at the door. It was open about an inch.

But no one had responded. Perhaps the judge was in the yard.

Bender walked around the house and looked as closely as he could among the numerous trees and bushes. No person was visible.

He returned to the porch. The door had not moved. He decided to go in.

He pushed the door open and stepped into a deep hall carpeted with a long red Oriental runner.

"Judge Whiteman," he called.

No answer came, and no sound of movement was heard.

He explored several of the rooms leading off the hall without encountering anyone. Then, in the last room on the right, he found him.

In his booklined study, Judge Whiteman was sprawled across his blood-spattered mahogany desk, his head beaten in, the floor beneath him a red horror. He was unquestionably dead.

Bender's first instinct was to turn and run as fast as he could. Then an inner compulsion caused him to look closer at the scene. It was because of that that he found it.

Behind the desk, its head drenched in blood, was his own hammer.

A grim smile crossed his face. "Trying for two for the price of one, eh, Jules? Well, I don't think so."

He unwrapped the other hammer and carefully exchanged it for his own. He then smeared Vernet's hammer equally and dropped it behind the desk.

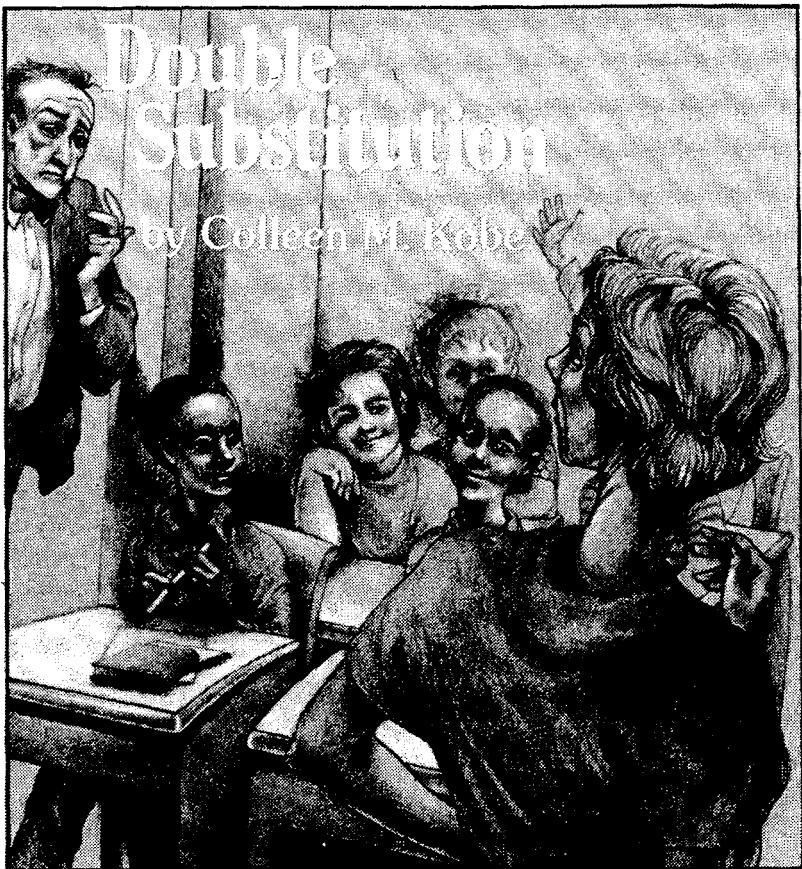
He was pondering how to draw attention to Vernet as he climbed back into his car. Suddenly he lost interest in that for the moment.

"My God!" he said, his hand arrested in the act of inserting the ignition key. "I almost made it *first* degree this time."

Lowering his head, he vowed to restore Marie's monument, no matter what time limits were required.

# Double Substitution

by Colleen M. Kobe



Irene Everett eyed the Moon Children with professional interest. They seemed to be have much like any other sixth-graders, Earth-born or not. *Well, she amended, perhaps they bounce around a bit more.*

She sat behind a new aluminum work desk whose contents did not belong to her, on

a chair too stiff for the moon's slight gravity. She touched her graying hair and smoothed her dark green skirt. The children ignored her as children always ignored substitute teachers until the last possible moment. They had entered the room one by one, red-faced and breathless; all the children showed

surprise when they saw her.

The 0900 bell rang, and Irene rose and crossed to the front of her desk. "I'm Ms. Irene Everett," she announced when the children quieted. "Mr. Brigham became ill last night, so I'm your substitute teacher. I see from his agenda that science is your first class, and that you have homework to go over. Please get out your books—"

The classroom door opened, interrupting her. Mare Imbrium High School Principal Walter Barrister stuck his balding, gray head in. Irene had heard he was only forty, but he looked ten years older. "Ms. Everett. So sorry to disturb you, but can I see you out here a moment?"

"Uh, certainly, just a moment." She turned back to her pupils. "Class, I'll be right back. Ahm—" she turned to a plump brunette girl wearing faded coveralls stuffed into knee-high boots—"what's your name?"

"Andrea."

"Well, Andrea, will you be class monitor until I return? This will only take a minute." She walked to the door and glanced behind her. Andrea strode pompously to the front of the room, turned, and folded her arms firmly. Irene closed the door and walked to join the principal, who tapped his foot impatiently.

"What can I do for you, Walter?"

"Just a minute, just a minute." He quietly checked the door. Then, sighing, he took her arm and led her down the hall, slapping his free hand against his thigh compulsively. Two suitcoated gentlemen waited around the corner for them.

"Irene, this is Dick Nguyen and Jerome Kubaki, from Lunar Intelligence." She shook their hands. She smiled. They did not. "It seems we have a rather large problem. Jeez!" he exploded suddenly, smacking his hand against the white brick wall. "Why, why, *why* does this have to happen to *me*?" His hands trembled violently as he fumbled for a cigarette. "Always me, always me," he muttered angrily. The shorter of the two men lit the cigarette for him. Walter inhaled and began to cough explosively.

"Take it easy, Walter. Whatever it is, it can't be that bad." Irene awkwardly patted him on the back.

Jerome Kubaki cleared his throat. "Ms. Everett," he said, "we're here because there's a Chameleon in your room."

"What!" Irene exclaimed. "A Chameleon? *Here*? On the *Moon*?" She glanced from Jerome to Dick and back. "Surely there must be some mistake. Really. A Chameleon? How

could he get this close to Earth without getting caught? And what for?"

Jerome sighed. Irene noticed absently that his eyes seemed to lack color. *Or maybe that's what they call gray. They match his hair.*

"Our intelligence reports that a small two-man scouter ship made its way through our defenses all the way to Mars," said Jerome. "From there we tracked it to here, although our ships were spread so few and far between that none could intercept it in time. Besides, they still have the faster ships. We're working on that.

"Anyway, they landed last night on the dark side. We found their ship, but no traces of the occupants. A lot of good that would do us, even if we had, because when they change their shapes it's tough to tell the difference between them and the real McCoy. Right now, anyway. However. They can't just float through walls, either, at least we don't think they can, so when we got an unauthorized entry on Port Seven here this morning, we knew we were getting close. So. We had the computer check every monitor in every room in this whole damn quadrant and found we had one room with an anomaly: seven people, and only six life-readings. Yours. You have a

Chameleon in your room."

Irene's knees threatened to buckle. "My God. One of those children—really isn't—and the others . . . What do you plan to do about it?"

"We have one plan, and it depends a lot on you," said Jerome. "We want you to go back in there and figure out which kid is the Chameleon and send it out here."

This time Irene did sag; Walter reached out and grabbed her arm as she fell. "I—you want *me* to go back in there? But I don't know anything about espionage or Chameleons or deceit or anything! I wouldn't even know where to begin! I'm sure I'd be much more of a hindrance than a hel—"

"Shut up and listen," hissed Walter coldly, squeezing her arm hard. "Just listen to me. You *have* to go back into that room because none of us can."

"Why the hell not?"

"For God's sake, think a minute. Suppose he, or it, or whatever you call them, suppose it decides to turn into some big hungry carnivore with big sharp teeth? Or a cloud of carbon monoxide? He could easily kill us all! No. *We* can't go into the room without arousing suspicion, but *you* can. What we need is some way to figure out which student he's masquerading as, and get him to go outside and

these two guys here can catch him then."

"Oh, sure, with what? A vacuum cleaner?"

"That's our business, Ms. Everett," answered Jerome with a tight smile. "As it happens, when the Chameleons assume a body-shape, they also become vulnerable to that body's weaknesses. Now, I doubt if they can turn into a cloud of gas because it would be too hard to get themselves all back together again, but that's mere conjecture. Anyway, when he comes out the door, we can stun him with this—" he lifted his suit coat enough for her to glimpse a holster with a dark object in it—"and then we'll have our first prisoner of war."

"But how can I figure out which one of those children really—*isn't*?" wailed Irene. "I don't even know what they're like under ordinary circumstances."

"You don't?" asked Jerome.

"No. I was called in this morning to substitute for Arthur Brigham."

"Wonderful," he groaned.

Irene wracked her mind desperately for a way to avoid reentering the classroom. *Calm down*, she told herself. *You think better calm*. "Have you tried calling the kids' parents to find out which ones went to school today?"

"Yes," Jerome said. "All the children left at seven thirty sharp from their respective homes. It seems there was some kind of a race to get to school, with the winner getting a prize."

"Oh! That's why they were so excited this morning."

"This isn't helping anything," interrupted Walter. "How are we going to get that thing out of there?"

"Well, let's see. Say, why do you suppose he's in a sixth grade classroom of all places?" wondered Irene. "It seems to me that he could assume the shape of a tree or a bulkhead somewhere and not have to worry about arousing suspicion by breaking character. He wouldn't get caught as easy." Irene turned to Dick Nguyen. "What do you think, Dick?"

Jerome interrupted smoothly, "Dick doesn't speak. He has no vocal cords."

"Oh," said Irene. "Excuse me."

"Perhaps it would help if we went over what we know, and the sooner the better," Jerome continued. "What we know is this. At seven thirty this morning, all the children left their houses to come here. We know that two children live north of this school, two live west of school, and two live east of school. Each child, however, took a different route to increase his or her chance of win-

ning, and each route was either inside or outside."

"You mean they spacewalked?" asked Irene.

"No, they didn't spacewalk, they just walked outside of the buildings. The ones that walked inside walked through the tunnels and such. Now. At some point during the walk, one of the children was accosted and the Chameleon took his or her place. But which one? And when? We don't know for sure.

"However, we do have a report of a peculiar sighting," he went on. "A field laborer was bicycling to work near the school this morning when he noticed a child walking through the cornfield. In itself that was nothing unusual, although it's frowned upon, but he noticed something odd about the kid. For one thing, he looked as if he were having trouble walking. Not that walking looked painful, but like it was an effort. And if it was an effort, what was the kid doing out there in the first place? There are any number of easier ways of getting to school."

"The Chameleon," said Irene.

"That's how it looks. He must have already assumed the child's shape and was continuing on the child's way. Apparently they pick up a lot of the host's memories when they assume a shape."

"Boy or girl?" asked Walter.

"Couldn't tell. It was dawn, and with the season-simulators it was too dark to notice much besides that it was a kid. And anyway he probably couldn't see much—the corn gets pretty high by this time of year."

"Can't you just figure out from where the guy saw the kid who it was?" asked Irene. "Surely the sighting was more north than south, or east than west, and you could tell that it must be one or the other."

"No, because just north of the school, all three outside trails converge. From the cornfield south—and it really is a good shortcut to the school—all the kids walk together. If they come via outside.

"We have a time limit, too, I'm afraid," Jerome added after a pause.

"A time limit?" echoed Walter faintly. "Great."

"Yes. We have tentative information that a Chameleon develops strain when he maintains a shape for more than two Earth hours. After that he has to change back to his real shape, which is some sort of a gelatinous blob. It looks harmless but it emits cyanide gas. Deadly to any human nearby."

They were silent a moment. "Is that what happens when they lose consciousness, too?" asked Irene.



Jerome chuckled grimly. "As far as we know. We've never actually witnessed one assume a human shape before. And now, time's wasting. Have you any ideas?"

"I know!" Irene grinned excitedly. "We can just have every child leave the room one at a time and monitor the life-readings in the room! That way when someone leaves and the readings don't change, we'll know that child was the Chameleon."

"Don't be stupid, Irene," Walter snapped. "Don't you think we already thought of that? Why not just announce at the front of the room, 'Hey, Mr. Chameleon, come out, come out, whoever you are'? I *told* you it can change into anything—or *anybody*—it damn well pleases. And as soon as it figures out we're onto him, he will. And *you're* the only one he won't suspect immediately. You *have* to be the one to nail him. Nobody else would stand a chance."

Irene fell silent. "Well," she sighed, "I guess I don't have a whole lot of choice. How much time do we have?"

Jerome glanced at his chrono. "Thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes," whispered Irene.

"Thirty minutes!" wailed Walter.

With a visible effort, Irene

pulled herself together. *It's got to be me. Nobody else can reasonably do this.* "I'll send a child out of the room within the next half hour," she told the men. "That child will be the Chameleon. Do what you have to then."

Jerome nodded unhappily. "Remember, thirty minutes."

"Remember, Irene," said Walter urgently, "don't believe everything the kids say. You never know which one is the Chameleon, he could be lying."

"Yes, sir."

"And if it looks as if something strange is happening to one of them, act like there's nothing wrong but get the rest the hell out of there." Walter ran his fingers through his hair, leaving it sticking up. "Can you imagine the lawsuits the parents could slap us for? My God."

"Yes, sir."

"And for God's sakes, Irene, *don't excite it!*" Walter's face puckered. He bonked his head gently against the white cinderblock wall. "Why me?" he moaned softly. "Why always me?"

Irene turned and walked slowly down the hall. She realized that her palms were sweating and that her heart felt like a tap dancer's foot. *Calm down, Irene.* She paused to take a breath, then, pasting a smile on her face, entered the room.

The chatter in the classroom abruptly ceased. The girl she'd left in charge sat on her desk, arms still crossed. Three names were scrawled on the blackboard. "Ms. Irene, these kids were bad while you were gone," she squealed. She pointed a pudgy finger at the board.

"Oh, huh, Andrea, you baby," scowled one of the two black boys.

"Thank you very much, Andrea," Irene said smoothly. "You may be seated now." The fat girl waddled to her desk and plopped down gracelessly.

"Now that you children know my name, how about if you tell me yours?" Irene continued pleasantly. "Let's go around and introduce ourselves." She looked over her six students.

The children reflected the racial diversity of the lunar colonists. Four boys and two girls occupied two rows of three chairs each; the rear of the small room sported the computer work stations the children used for their classwork. The black boys were identical twins; thankfully, they wore different colored shirts. The one in the front seat wore blue, and the one behind him was in yellow. She nodded expectantly to the twins.

"I'm Chuck Walkerson," said the twin in the blue shirt.

"And I'm Craig Walkerson," said the twin in yellow.

The chunky brunette smiled in the center chair in the first row, nose high in the air. "I'm Andrea DuPres," she announced.

Behind her sat a frail-looking girl with frizzy blonde hair. She examined her mechanical pencil with a slight frown. She wore an expensive green printed dress. A doll sprawled haphazardly beneath her chair. "I'm Bonnie Broker," she whispered shyly.

The redheaded boy beside Andrea fidgeted in his seat, catching Irene's eye. "I'm Harrison Oliver Snodgrass the Fourth," he announced proudly. "Or Harry."

The last boy, behind Harry, looked up long enough to say, "I'm Rodney King," before he resumed his quiet perusal of his science textbook.

*Is your quietness because you have nothing to contribute, wondered Irene, or because you don't want to attract attention?*

*Okay, now. Irene walked slowly around her desk. Who do I have? Chuck and Craig, Harry, Rod, Bonnie, and Andrea. And one of them is not what he appears to be. But which one is the ringer? And how do I trip him up without letting him know?*

"So," she began, "I understand you had some kind of a contest this morning." Several heads nodded. "Just exactly

what was it? Was it a relay race?"

"No, it was a get-to-school race," exclaimed Harry. "And I won it!"

Instantly, dissenting voices filled the room. "You did not, you liar," snorted Andrea. "It was a tie between you and Craig."

"Oh, huh," protested Harry. "I was here first! And I get to have a day off next week."

"Look, if he wants so bad to have a day off, let him," said Craig quietly. "The reason I only tied with him was because I—I—" He hesitated.

"You what?" asked Bonnie gently.

He reddened and stared fixedly at his desktop. "Oh, I, uh, I had to go to the restroom." Andrea giggled.

Irene glanced casually over at the coat rack. Three coats hung limply on the coat hooks. One of them was a girl's. She looked back at the children.

"Well, it sure is interesting that someone really did win the contest, anyway," she smiled, realizing how inane that sounded. "How about if we tell each other the routes we took to get here today? I bet maybe we could all get ideas if we think together." *And besides, maybe one of you will give yourself away.* "Now, who wants to go first?"

Silence.

"How about you, Bonnie? What route did you take to get here?"

Bonnie lowered her eyes and shook her head. Irene frowned. "What's the matter? Don't you want to share with us?"

Bonnie glanced up wide-eyed, then hesitated. She stole a look at Harry, who smirked, and shook her head to Irene again.

"Oh, for crying out loud, Bonnie," said Andrea impatiently. "Just *tell* her. It's not a secret."

"No," hissed Bonnie to Andrea.

"Well, then," interrupted Irene smoothly, "how about if you tell us your route, Andrea?"

"Okay. I live, um, north of here. That way." She pointed. "Or is it that way? Anyway, I walked outside to school today." She crossed her arms and looked around her. "You wanna know why I walked outside? Because my mom says it's quicker because it's always quicker to move in a straight line than in a curved one. And she's right!"

"Oh, yeah? Then why didn't you win?" snickered Craig.

Andrea whirled in her chair. "You shut up, Chuck, you jerk!"

"I didn't say that," protested Chuck.

"Maybe I had a longer way to go than you did," Andrea continued hotly. "Did you ever

think of that? Noooo-o-oo."

Bonnie raised her hand.

"Yes?" said Irene.

"Can I go to the restroom?"

Oh, no, thought Irene. She glanced at her chrono. Twenty minutes to go. "Ah, well, Bonnie, we're just about to start some important work, and I really think it would be a better idea if you waited." Irene ground on, ignoring the incredulous looks the children gave her. "Why don't we get out our science books now?" she continued, reaching behind to pick up her own. The children shuffled in their desks to get their books out.

*Though come to think of it, Irene thought quickly, there's only one girl's coat, and Andrea has admitted that it's hers. She's wearing boots, and no one corrected her, so I believe her. So Bonnie must have walked to school inside, and she can't be the Chameleon: Irene felt pleased at this unfamiliar chain of logic.*

"Sure is getting cool outside at night nowadays, isn't it?" Irene continued cheerfully. "The trees out in the courtyard are even starting to turn colors. Since I see you're studying botany, who can tell me why leaves change colors in the fall? Chuck?"

"Because it gets colder?" he guessed.

"Nooo . . . Anybody else want to try? Rod?"

"Because the plants aren't getting as much light as they're used to," the quiet boy said confidently.

"Right. A drop in temperature happens to accompany the gradual decrease in light every fall. I wonder how cold it is out today?" she said suddenly, inspired. "Would you like to check the temperature for us?"

"Sure." Rod rose and walked to the windowsill upon which the outdoor thermometer perched precariously outside. He looked at it from several angles, frowning. "It's turned so I can't see it." He reached up to the window latch, and before Irene could protest, opened it. The thermometer, freed of support, fell slowly and silently to the ground outside. "Oops."

"Good going, Rod," giggled Andrea. "You're getting almost as good as Harry." Harry stuck his tongue out at her.

*Wait a minute, thought Irene suddenly. Assume that the twins came from one direction, and that one of the coats belongs to them. The girl's coat belongs to Andrea. Could Rod own the third coat? He looks like maybe it'd fit . . . but what if he doesn't live in the same direction as Andrea? But on the other hand, what if he does? Ooh, my aching head. How can anyone think*

*when it's so hot in this room?*

Irene glanced at the clock. Ten minutes.

She surveyed the remaining faces. *Well, one of them has to be it. But which? Andrea, Rod, Chuck, Craig, or Harry? For heaven's sakes, maybe I should just come out and ask each child which direction he lives in and hope the Chameleon doesn't catch on—no. I can't assume it's that dumb.* She wiped her sweaty palms inconspicuously—she hoped—on her skirt.

"Open your books to page one hundred twelve. Now, I need a reader. Any volunteers? Chuck?" He nodded and began to read aloud.

"Chapter Two. Plant Research Discoveries. The biggest findings in recent his—history were the disc—discovery of gen—general—" Chuck paused, struggling with the word. Harry snickered loudly. "Genetics, clowning—no, cloning tech—techniques, and Goober, I mean—" By now Harry was openly chuckling. Chuck glared angrily at him. "Think you're something, don't you, Harry?"

"Hey, when you got it, flaunt it."

"Oh, yeah?" Chuck leaned slowly back in his chair, crossed his arms, and an unpleasant grin spread over his face. "Well, I got something, too. I have a secret. I know why you didn't

want to announce your route to school. What'll you do if I tell?"

Harry's grin froze.

"Think you're so smart that you won, huh. Cheater! You cheated. I wasn't gonna say anything, but I am now. I hate it when people make fun of me." Chuck suddenly turned to Irene. "You know how he got here before everybody else?"

"Shut up!" screamed Harry. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Chuck ignored him. "His father drove him in. I saw them."

"Oh yeah? Oh yeah?" Harry stood half out of his seat now. "How do you know, Bigshot? Were you there?"

"Yeah! As a matter of fact, I was. I saw you coming in."

"Well, I didn't see you, and I looked all over the place."

"That's because—" Chuck paused. "That's none of your business," he concluded huffily. "Can I go on reading now?" he asked Irene.

But Harry was not about to let it drop. "I know how you saw me today. You took a shortcut! You cut through the cornfield, and you know no one's supposed to cut through the cornfield!" He turned frantically to Irene. "You heard it, Ms. Irene! Chuck cheated, Chuck cheated!"

"Oh, no, I didn't. He did!" shouted Chuck, stabbing a finger at Craig, who looked up in surprise.

"Now, wait a minute here—"

Andrea rolled her eyes. "Oh, geez, here we go again. It's *always* like this with you two. 'He did, no, I didn't, *he* did.' " She turned to Harry. "Hey, Harry, even if one of them did cut through the field—so what? At least *he* doesn't *bother* other people when they walk to school, like *you* do. Why don't you leave poor Bonnie alone? You're driving her crazy. Why do you think she didn't want to say how she got here, anyway? 'Cause she finally found a route that you wouldn't bother her on, that's why. So just knock it off."

*So Bonnie and Harry come from the same direction, thought Irene, taking advantage of the noisy opportunity to think. But I know Bonnie walked inside, so Harry must have walked outside—except that his father drove him, so he couldn't be the Chameleon. So that leaves Andrea, Rod, and the twins. But then Rod must have come from Andrea's direction, and since she walked outside he must have walked inside—and is therefore innocent.*

*So now I have three suspects left: Andrea, Chuck, and Craig. And I have five minutes to figure out which one is the Chameleon.*

Or, she amended suddenly, *which ones are not.*

*Andrea walked outside, I know*

*that. One of the twins also walked outside—and that was Chuck because he spilled the beans on Harry, who admitted Chuck was right—that Harry did cheat. So Craig must be out, because he traveled inside. So now we're down to Andrea versus Chuck.*

Sweat trickled down Irene's shirt. *I'm running out of time and ideas, so I'll have to make an educated guess. Walter will kill me. Andrea or Chuck? Would an Alien who doesn't wish to be discovered be as loud and brassy as Andrea has been? Would he read as well as Chuck?*

*Who the hell knows what motivates an alien?*

Abruptly she thought, *Let's let you trap yourself, Alien. You wanna leave? Here's your chance.*

Sharply she clapped her hands twice. "Enough! It's time to continue. But first, ah, I think I've run out of paper clips. I need someone to go to the supply room to get some for me. Any volunteers? Andrea?"

The fat girl shrugged. "Sure, I—"

"I will," cried Bonnie.

"I will, I will!" shouted Chuck. "Let me go!"

"Fine, Chuck, you can go," Irene smiled. Chuck half-ran out of the room. She listened intently as the door closed behind him. Muted shuffling sounds penetrated the door; then she heard a high-pitched, in-

human wail echo down the hall. The children stared fearfully at the door.

"Ms. Irene—?" whispered Andrea. Irene motioned for silence.

After an eternity, the door opened. Walter stuck his head in, just as he had—was it only thirty minutes ago?—and motioned for her to come into the hall.

"We got him," he said dazedly. "I mean, it."

"Great. Um, Andrea, would you—"

"Sure."

"Good, good." Irene followed Walter out into the hall where Jerome already stood alone. A gray, windowless, stainless steel cube reaching to Irene's shoulders dominated the hall just out of sight of the door.

"What's in there now?" Irene asked.

Jerome stood on the other side of the small prison. "The Chameleon. It's in its native form. It is, however, sedated and should remain so for a while. We think."

"No chance of its getting out of there, is there?"

Jerome smiled grimly. "None."

Irene stared at the small

prison, then sighed hugely. A great weight rolled off her shoulders. "Have you found Chuck yet? I mean the real one?"

Walter reached for another cigarette. "Yeah, they found him about a hundred meters from the place the worker said. Good place to hide him. In those damn cornfields this time of year, he could have stayed invisible forever. Well, at least for a few more weeks. They just found him five minutes ago. So even if you hadn't figured it out, we knew." Walter snorted. "Though I don't know what good it would have done us."

"Is he alive?"

"Barely. But the doctor said he should live." Walter exhaled abruptly. "How did you know, anyway? Should I ask, I mean do I really want to know?"

Irene smiled sweetly. "I just used common, everyday logic, Walter. Have you ever heard of it?"

He scowled thunderously.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have a classroom to care for. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Nguyen, Mr. Kubaki." With that, Irene returned to the familiar business of a substitute teacher.



# UNSOLVED

by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the August issue.

Messrs. Draper, Grocer, Baker, and Hatter are (appropriately enough) a draper, grocer, baker, and hatter. But none of them is the namesake of his own vocation.

When I tried to find out who is who, four statements were made to me: (1) "Mr. Draper is the hatter." (2) "Mr. Grocer is the draper." (3) "Mr. Baker is not the hatter." (4) "Mr. Hatter is not the baker." But clearly there was something wrong here, since Mr. Baker is not the baker.

I subsequently discovered that three of the four statements made to me are untrue.

*Who is the grocer?*

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See page 146 for the solution to the June puzzle.

*"Falsehoods," taken from My Best Puzzles in Logic & Reasoning by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban"). Copyright © 1961 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.*

FICTION

# Bad Blood

by Loren D.  
Estleman

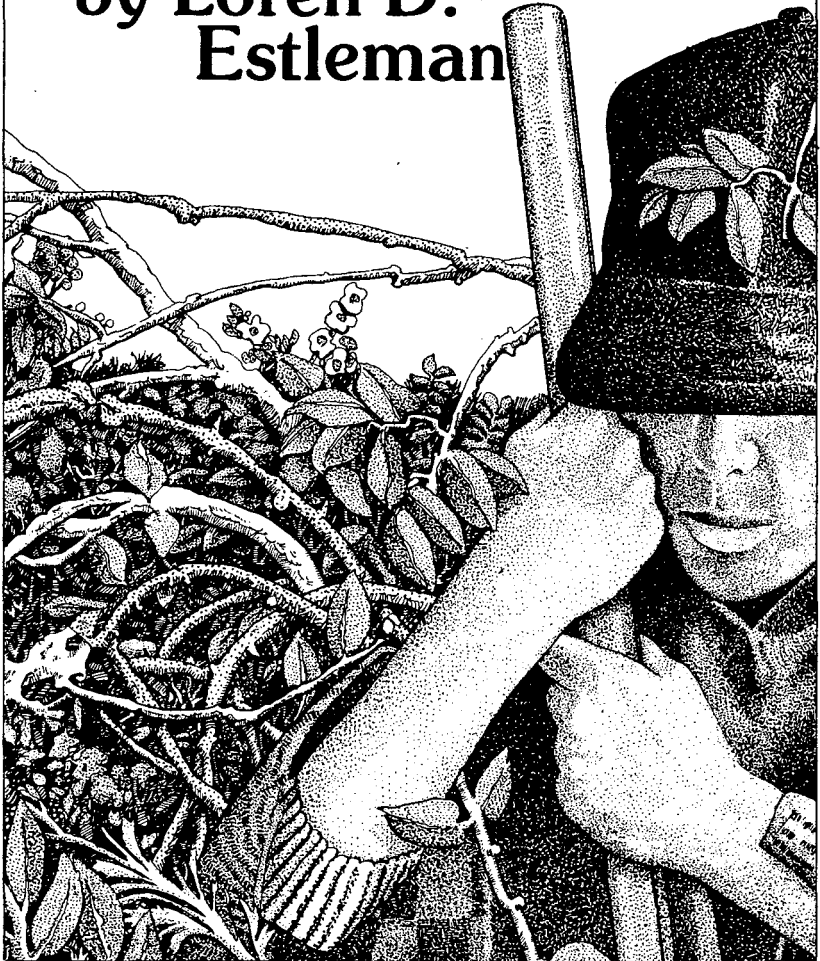


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

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**L**ight spread gray through the sycamores, igniting billions of hanging droplets with the black trunks standing among them looking not fixed to the earth but suspended from above like stalactites. A mockingbird awoke to release its complex scan into the sopping air. There was no answer and the song was not repeated. Leaves crackled, drying.

The man was already awake, a tense silhouette against a yellowing sun louvered by vertical tree shafts, a knee on the ground, the other drawn up to his chest and one fist wrapped around a rifle with its butt planted in the moist earth. His profile was sharp, with a pointed nose like a check mark, the angle dramatized by a long stiff bill tilting down from a green cap with JOHN DEERE embossed in block letters on a patch on the front of the crown. His shirt was coarse and blue under a red and black checked jacket with darns on the elbows. His jeans had been blue but were now earth-colored, like his boots under their cake of silver clay. He had been there in that position since an hour before dawn.

From where he was crouched, the ground fell off forty-five degrees to a berry thicket that girdled the mountain. The thicket had been transplanted by his great-grandfather from a nearby bog and allowed to grow wild until it resembled the tangled barbed wire in which the great-grandfather's son would snare himself thirty years later and wait for the sun to rise and the Germans to discover him in a muddy place called Ypres. This natural barrier had trapped a number of local men the same way, to wait like the soldier and, now, like the soldier's grandson for the dawn and what the dawn would bring. The slope bristled with leafed trees and cedars and twisted jackpines, heirs to the great towering monarchs that had fallen to the timber boom of another century, whose black stumps still dotted the mountainside like rotted teeth.

A third of the way down the slope, a hundred feet below him and two hundred feet above the thicket, stood his own shack. It had been built of logs when James Monroe was president, but a later ancestor had nailed clapboard over the logs to make it resemble a proper house. A four-paned window that had been covered with oiled paper before the coming of the railroad now reflected sunlight from three panes, emphasizing the blank space where a bullet had shattered the glass.

Now, as the sun lifted, its light struck sparks off tiny fragments on his jeans. He flicked them away carefully. Before tumbling out

of the shack he had made sure to remove his wristwatch and anything else that might catch light and betray him.

He knew who had fired the bullet. Inside the shack, its cracked black cover freshly nicked by that same projectile, lay a Bible as thick as a man's thigh, its cream flyleaves scribbled over in old brown ink with names of his forebears and the dates of their lives and deaths going back to 1789, when an indentured servant from Cornwall bought the book second-hand in London and recorded the birth of a son named Jotham. Four generations of names followed before the simple entry: "Eben Candler, murdered by Ezekiel Finlayson, Hawkins County, Kentucky, May 11, 1882. His will be done." Eighteen similar notations appeared on succeeding pages, in differing hands, until the survivors wearied of keeping count. The final line, "Jotham Edward Candler, born September 8, 1951," written in his father's formal script, commemorated his own birth. Finlayson losses were not included.

No one remembered the specifics of that first encounter between a Candler and a Finlayson, although it had something to do with the ownership of forty acres of bottomland in Unico County. Only the casualties were remembered. Jotham's own coming of age had been marked by a daily catechism in which he was expected to recite, in whatever order asked, the names of the Candler slain, their murderers, and the dates of their deaths as they had been recorded in the big Bible; and when he was strong enough to lift a squirrel rifle, he had been taught to think of his small, furry targets not as squirrels, but as Finlaysons.

It did not matter that no one knew who held title to those forty acres—that was as gone as the bottomland itself, seized by the bank during the depression of 1893—or that the fecundity of the Candler and Finlayson women had led to considerable interbreeding between the two families during the long truces. Hatred was an inheritance as solid and treasured as the old Bible and Great-Grandmother Candler's homely samplers, their red embroidery and white linen gone the same dead-skin brown on the walls of the tiny shack. Jotham, with a bachelor's degree in agriculture and three years in Vietnam behind him, was growing marijuana on plots that had supported his father's stills, and the Finlaysons had sold Ezekiel's ferrier's shop to buy a funeral home and the first of a chain of hardware stores, but aside from that little had changed. Bad blood was bad always.

As the sun cleared the mountain, its light turned leafy green

coming down through the branches. Creatures stirred in the dry-shuck mattress of last year's leaves, and the last wisp of woodsmoke left the shack's chimney in a bit of shredded tissue that vanished into the thatch of fog now treetop-high as it lifted and broke apart. Jotham's assailant would know by that that he was no longer inside. The waiting was almost ended.

Jotham was the last Candler to bear that surname. His sisters were married and his only brother had died in Korea before Jotham was old enough to remember him. He would carry the name to the grave with him because of what the army's defoliants had done to his genes in Da Nang. In view of that temptation—the opportunity to wipe out by one death the long line of Candles—young Bertram Finlayson's attempt to kill him in his sleep that morning seemed long overdue.

For he had no doubt it was Bertram. Eight years Jotham's junior, he had been too young to serve in Vietnam, and had spent that frustration in turkey shoots across the state, winning a caseful of trophies to display under the antlered heads on the walls of his fine house in town. His arsenal was a legend among collectors of firearms and he often boasted that he had used them to kill every kind of animal that lived in the county but one. He was the only Finlayson young enough and mean enough to bother about a fight that most had thought was buried with Jotham's father.

Several times since Jotham had returned from college, Bertram had tried to draw him into something in town, from which Jotham had always walked away. Witnesses said it was because he had had enough of killing in Asia. But those who said that were thinking of other wars, did not understand that the object of his had been to stay alive; killing came secondary, if at all. And now here he was, twelve years and ten thousand miles later, trying to stay alive in another jungle.

A squirrel began chattering, a high-pitched coughing noise like a small engine trying to start. Something was annoying it. Not him; the squirrel was too far away, high in an ash on the other side of the shack. He spotted its humped profile on the side of the trunk sixty feet up and scanned the ground at the base. A treefall twenty yards down the slope looked promising. He raised the 30.06 and lined up the iron sights and sent a bullet into the center of the fall. Something jumped, startled. Dead leaves rattled on the inert branches.

The echo of his first report was still snarling in the distance

when he fired again, into those moving leaves. Almost instantly, a section of bark on a cedar a foot to Jotham's right exploded in a cloud of splinters, followed quickly by the crack of a .30-30. He hurled himself and his weapon headlong down the slope, rolling and coming up on the other side of a clump of suckers grown up around a pine stump. The squirrel had stopped chattering.

Bertram was a cooler hand than he'd thought. After the first shot he had waited, then fired at Jotham's second muzzle flash.

Again the waiting began.

Once, after exchanging fire with a Cong he had never seen, Jotham had waited for eleven hours in a fog of mosquitoes and heavy air, unmoving, his survival dependent upon his either killing the guerrilla or boring him into moving on. At the end the Cong had lost patience first, and when he rose from cover to investigate, Jotham had taken his head off with a burst from his M-16. How to wait was the hardest lesson of all. He settled himself on his other knee to give that haunch a rest.

The sun climbed into a thin sheeting of clouds that parted from time to time, changing the light as in an ancient motion picture. The air warmed, grew hot and thick. Twice he was attacked by wood ticks, once on the back of a hand, the other time, very painfully, on his neck. He did not move to brush them away.

When the sun was directly overhead, he knew a terrible urge to get up and find out if Bertram was still there. More than the heat, it made the sweat stand out in burrs on his forehead and greased his armpits and crotch. It must have been what the Cong felt just before he committed suicide. But Jotham held his position and it subsided.

No one came up the mountain. In other years, uninvited visitors had met moonshiners' buckshot, and now even the authorities counseled against wandering the hills and chancing the protective wrath of marijuana growers and mad survivalists.

Around midafternoon the sky darkened and big drops pattered the leaves on the ground and rolled along the edge of the bill of Jotham's cap and hung quivering before falling to his raised thigh with loud plops. He swung the rifle horizontal to keep moisture out of the barrel. But the rain passed swiftly. A rainbow arched over the shack and melted away.

The air cooled toward dusk. Bertram would have to move soon. Jotham's new knowledge of his enemy's instincts told him that he would not again risk darkness in the woods with an experienced

jungle fighter. Jotham reversed legs again, working the stiffness out of the long muscles in his thighs.

The woods to the west were catching fire in the lowering sun when a buck muledeer that Jotham had never heard went crashing off through the trees on the opposite side of the shack, blatting a warning to others of its kind. At that moment the treefall shook and a pair of bull shoulders with a hatless head nestled in between reared against a sky striped with tree trunks. Light sheared along something long and shiny.

Jotham raised his rifle without aiming, trusting to the barrel to find its mark because he could no longer see the front sight, and touched the trigger. The butt pulsed against his shoulder, but he did not hear the blast. It had been that way when he'd killed the Cong. In roaring silence the bull shoulders hunched and the hatless head went back and the silhouette crumpled in on itself like a balloon deflating. The long and shiny thing flashed, falling.

Jotham let the sun slip to a red crescent before rising. In gray light he approached the treefall, lifting his feet clear of the old stumps more from memory than from sight, his eyes fixed on the dark thing draped over the treefall with the .30-30 on the ground in front of it. Carefully he used a foot to slide the rifle farther out of the reach of the dangling hands, then took another step and grasped a handful of straw-colored hair and raised a slack face with open eyes and mouth into the last ray of light. It was Bertram Finlayson.

He let the face drop and started down the mountain toward town to tell his sister Lucy that she was a widow.



FICTION

# Walling Up the Calls

by James A. Noble



**T**hatcher had just gotten off the phone with his third starving teenager and had settled into his chair when the phone rang again.

"That's it!" he roared angrily, choking and shaking the sports section and an innocent Dallas linebacker with both hands.

"Really, Thatch. Calm down,"

said Winnie without looking up from her knitting.

Thatch struggled to extricate his bulk from the chair. "Where's my police whistle? I'm going to blow it next to the mouthpiece and drive their little eardrums into their obviously undersized frontal lobes."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Our phone number is so similar to theirs, anyone could get it mixed up. It's just an honest mistake. Now treat it as such."

Thatch snatched the receiver from its cradle. Without pause, he growled into phone. "The following is a recorded message. This is not, I repeat, this is not Petri's Pizza Hotline. Kindly display some initiative and look the stupid number up."

Winnie gave him a disapproving stare. "Now, Thatch . . ."

"At the sound of the beep, please place a metal waste receptacle over your head and beat on it rapidly with a ball-peen hammer."

Thatcher was about to slam the receiver down when a confused expression crossed his face; then his jaw dropped and he shrank about three inches in stature.

"It's for you," he said meekly.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," scolded Winnie. "I hope it's not Reverend Bailey."

"No . . . it's your friend Cap-

tain Evert from the police department," mumbled Thatch as he handed her the phone and shuffled toward the kitchen. "I think I'll go make myself a stiff drink."

Thatch hid in the kitchen for several minutes before he drank enough courage to go back to the sitting room and face the music. Fortunately, Winnie had returned to her knitting and appeared deep in thought.

Thatcher quietly sat down in his chair and attempted to salvage the sports section. It was too far gone, and he soon gave up. Finally, he could stand the silence no longer and noisily cleared his throat to get Winnie's attention.

"What did the good captain have to say, my dear?"

Winnie paused in her knitting.

"Apparently, we're not the only ones receiving bothersome phone calls. Someone has been calling the front desk at the police station at precisely twelve noon every day since Monday."

"Saying exactly what?" asked Thatch quickly, pleased that Winnie hadn't made any reference to his recent behavior.

"Threats," said Winnie, indicating a notepad on the coffee table. "Captain Evert read transcripts of the calls to me and I jotted them down. Take a look."

Thatch picked up the pad and flipped it open.

### Monday

Listen good. On Saturday, at exactly precisely noon, I'm gonna explode some bombs I planted that are gonna destroy your stinkin' station and the worthless cops who stay in it.

Thanks to you bums I've lost my wife forever and now you're gonna pay. Next time you'll think twice before you victimize innocent people.

You'll be hearin' from me. You got five days.

Thatcher glanced at the similar notes for Tuesday through Thursday. Each of the threatening calls ended with a count-down of the number of days left.

"Today is Thursday. That means there's less than two days to go. I gather the captain is taking this seriously."

Winnie sighed. "Unfortunately, no. He's had the building thoroughly searched inside and out three times already. He even brought in bomb-sniffing dogs. They haven't turned up anything.

"I'm afraid Captain Evert has decided he's dealing with a crank caller."

Thatch flipped back to the first note. "The Monday call seems to indicate the explosives are already planted. But perhaps that's just a ruse. Wouldn't it seem more likely that the bomber would set his explosives shortly before the Saturday deadline? After all, it is a bit difficult to acquire a timer that can be set for more than twelve or twenty-four hours in advance."

"But not impossible," said Winnie. "And certainly more likely than slipping the bombs into the station at this time. Captain Evert is having everyone and everything checked that comes in."

Thatcher rubbed his chin. "How about under the building? A storm drain or tunnel of some sort?"

"Nope. They've already looked. There are none."

Thatch shrugged. "Then I have to agree with your Captain Evert. The man is a crank caller, a nuisance."

"Perhaps," said Winnie, "but there's something about the transcripts of those phone calls that bothers me. In any case, the best way to find out what this fellow is up to is to capture him."

"Have the police attempted to trace the calls?"

"Yes, but he never seems to call from the same location and

he stays on the phone exactly half a minute, not quite long enough to complete the trace."

Thatch looked at the notepad again. "Then we'll have to use the clues he has provided in his phone calls. Now let me see . . ."

"Before you get started," warned Winnie, "let me assure you that the police have already checked the obvious leads."

"Please," said Thatch, gesturing for silence, "don't prejudice my deductions with a lot of . . . of . . ."

"Facts?"

Thatcher ignored the comment and scrutinized the Monday transcript.

"As I see it," he began, "this man was married and has been separated from his wife by some recent action by the police. Apparently he considers himself to be an innocent victim of their actions."

"I would suggest Captain Evert check his recent records for any accidental shootings involving the police in which a woman may have been killed."

Winnie resumed knitting. "It has already been done. Nothing."

"Maybe the police were tardy at some crime scene which resulted in the death of this man's wife and . . ."

"Nope. Try again."

"Ah, I have it. I've been as-

suming this man's wife was killed. The phrase 'lost my wife forever' might imply that he or she was sent to prison for a long stretch."

Winnie looked at Thatcher over the tops of her glasses. "What happened to your 'innocent victim' theory? Besides, how would he blow up a police station from a prison cell?"

"Perhaps she was the one sent up. Well, am I close?"

"No."

"I know. His wife ran off with a policeman."

"Really, Thatch. Such an imagination."

Thatcher slumped in his chair. "Okay, so what's your theory?"

"First of all, the police from that precinct have checked every single arrest or action they were involved in for the last three months that included a married or common law couple and haven't turned up any suspects. As far as they know, all the couples are still together, happily or otherwise."

"So?"

"So, they weren't married . . . yet."

"But he referred to her as his wife," objected Thatch.

"And that suggested to me that our man might have been on his way to be married."

"Now I get it," said Thatch, seeing the light. "On his way to the church, he gets stopped for

some routine violation, and by the time he arrives, his bride-to-be has disappeared, thinking he has jilted her. He must have to be pretty twisted to blame the police for that. How did that idea set with the captain?"

"At my suggestion, Captain Evert took a moment to query his patrolmen. One of his officers remembered stopping a car for speeding last month. The driver was an angry young man in a tuxedo. He became very hostile and uncooperative and the officer called for a backup. After a lengthy quarrel, the officer finally released him when he explained he was missing his own wedding. By all rights they should have taken the man into custody."

The phone rang. Thatcher cringed.

"Would you like me to get that, dear?" asked Winnie. "It might be Captain Evert whom you so impressed a little while ago."

"If . . . you wouldn't mind."

Winnie was back a minute later.

"That was the captain, I gather," said Thatcher.

"Indeed. And they have a name: Gerald Milton. The address is a rundown apartment on the west side which he vacated weeks ago."

"Is he now their main suspect?"

"Apparently. The situation was even worse than I surmised. According to his former landlady, not only did his prospective wife leave him when he didn't show up at the chapel, she stole all his valuables from the apartment and married his best man before she skedaddled to parts unknown."

"Good Lord."

Winnie resumed her knitting. "Other than that, neither the landlady nor the chaplain has been able to provide any information on Mr. Milton or his whereabouts. The prospects of locating him before Saturday noon don't look particularly good."

"I wouldn't worry about it, dear," said Thatch, stretching. "I'm sure that Mr. Milton is simply making empty threats."

"It's getting late. I think I'll turn in. I hope the late night pizza customers know how to dial a phone correctly so I can get some sleep."

Winnie perked up. "That's right. Our Mr. Milton has one more phone call to make at twelve noon Friday before the Saturday deadline, doesn't he?"

Thatch was struggling out of his chair. "You think if the police let him know they're onto him, he might give up his silly game?"

"Possibly," mused Winnie. "At least revealing the fact that

they know who he is might distract him long enough to give them the time to trace the call."

"I seriously doubt it," said Thatch. "He calls at precisely noon each day, stays on the line precisely thirty seconds, ends each call in precisely the same way . . . I don't think he'll be tricked by that."

"Thatch, that's it! He may not be tricked by that, but I bet we can fool him with your trick."

Thatcher flopped back into his chair. "My trick?"

"Do you remember what you first said to Captain Evert when you thought he was someone calling to order a pizza?"

"I said, 'This is not . . .'"

"No, no. Before that."

"This is a recorded message?"

"Precisely. You've given me an idea. Go get your cassette recorder. We're going to record a tape."

"Of what?"

"You'll see," said Winnie, heading for the phone.

She dialed the police station.

"Sergeant Waters? Winnie. I'm going to hang up and call you right back. I want you to do me a little favor."

The following morning, Thatch dropped the tape, the recorder, and Winnie's detailed instructions for their use at the police station. At exactly five

minutes after twelve, Gerald Milton was apprehended at a phone booth next to a filling station by a squad car dispatched to the location.

Late Saturday morning, Thatch drove over to the station to pick up his recorder and tape. He returned home shortly before noon.

"My dear, you are considered a genius at the police station. The idea worked like a charm.

"As soon as the desk sergeant's phone rang one time, they started your tape of the ringing phone, carefully lifted the receiver, and held it next to the recorder's speaker."

"And started the trace," added Winnie.

"They let the tape play through four or five rings. That time plus the normal thirty seconds Milton stays on the phone was sufficient to allow them to trace the call. You were correct about Milton, he was definitely determined to adhere to his precise routine. I think we could have let the tape run for several minutes and he wouldn't have hung up."

"Never mind that," said Winnie, looking uneasily at the clock. "Has Milton 'fessed up?"

"Well . . . no. He's not talking at all. He just sits around staring at the walls."

"Hmmm, staring at the walls you say?"

"You can be assured that his bomb is a hoax."

"Oh, really?"

"Of course," said Thatch. "Mr. Milton is now undergoing interrogation at the police station. If his bomb were real, he'd be blown up along with the station house. Mr. Milton might be mad, but he's not crazy."

"You said 'bomb,' didn't you? I thought he used the word 'bombs.'"

"I did? He did?"

Winnie pondered for a moment, then picked up the notepad still sitting on the coffee table and flipped to Monday's entry. She breathed a little gasp.

"Thatch, aren't the interrogation rooms at the station in the basement?"

"Yes, next to the holding cells. Why?"

Winnie handed the open pad to Thatch.

"Read it. Second sentence," she said as she jumped from her chair and raced for the telephone.

"'On Saturday, at precisely noon, I'm gonna explode some bombs I planted that are gonna destroy your stinkin' station and the worthless cops who stay in it.' I don't see what you're driving at."

"Look at what it doesn't say,

Thatch," said Winnie, dialing rapidly.

Thatcher shrugged. "What doesn't it say?"

"It doesn't say he's going to blow the station up. It says he's going to destroy it. How do you destroy a building other than blow it up but still use several explosive charges to do it?" Winnie glanced at the clock. Ten minutes to twelve.

"Good heavens! No wonder he was so confident the police wouldn't find the bombs. The building across the street. It's nearly fifteen stories high! He's going to bring it down on them."

Even if there had been time to bring in the bomb disposal squad, they wouldn't have been able to locate and disarm all of the explosive devices, so they followed Winnie's advice.

Gerald Milton suddenly became extremely cooperative when he was removed from the relative security of the basement interrogation room and dragged to the tall building across the street. Working with the speed and dexterity of a man who knew where his bombs were and how they worked and driven by an insatiable desire to remain in one piece, he completed the disarming job with a full two minutes to spare.

Captain Evert phoned



Thatcher with the good news.

"Evert informs me that Mr. Milton has made a complete confession," said Thatch as he hung up the phone and returned to his chair. "It seems that Mr. Milton was employed as an explosives expert for a building demolition company in another city. He had access to the materials he needed as well as the knowledge of how to make a building fall exactly where he wanted it to."

Winnie shook her head. "I simply can't imagine how he expected to succeed after he was apprehended."

"Not only did he feel the basement of the station would remain intact, he thought he could escape in the confusion."

The phone rang.

"That had better not be one of the kids ordering pizza," grumbled Thatch as got to his feet.

"Now, Thatch. I would think you'd learned your lesson. I don't want you giving the nice young people a hard time just because they made a simple mistake."

Thatch sighed as he lumbered to the phone.

"I mean it, Thatcher. Do you understand me?"

"Yessss, dear."

After a few minutes on the phone, Thatcher disappeared into the kitchen. A short time later, he returned and crashed in the chair. He began reading his paper.

"Did you tell them nicely they had the wrong number?" said Winnie after a long pause.

"I tried, but I couldn't get a word in edgewise," said Thatch through the newspaper.

"What did you do then?"

"I took their order. Then I called the pizza parlor and placed the same order with them, to be delivered here. I'll send the delivery boy to the correct address when he arrives."

"At least you didn't harass some innocent teenagers. Wouldn't it have been a lot easier for the pizza parlor to deliver it to the address the kids gave you rather than having them bring it here first?"

"Hmm, I suppose," mumbled Thatch, deeply engrossed in his paper.

Winnie gave up and tried to change the subject.

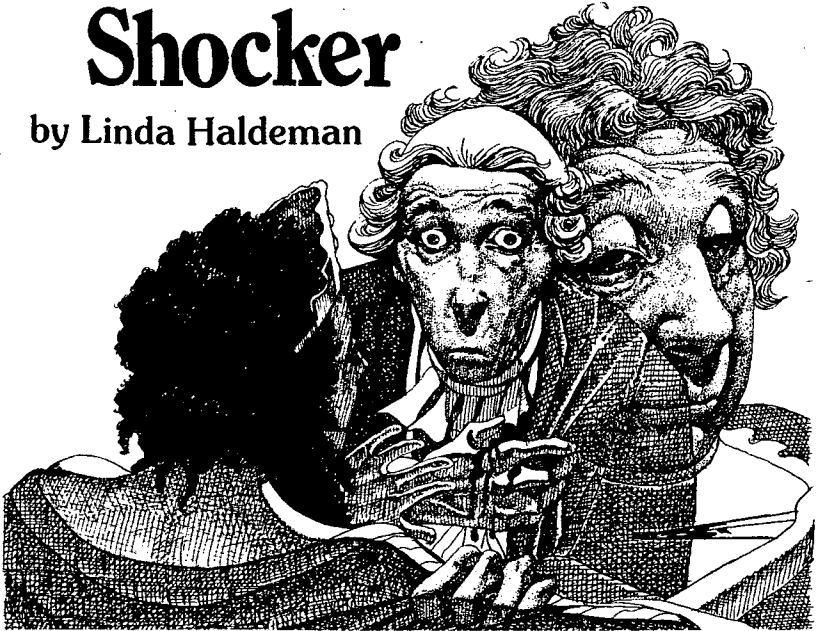
"What were you doing in the kitchen?"

Thatch slowly lowered the paper so Winnie could see his devilish grin.

"Checking on our supply of chocolate syrup."

# Shabby Little Shocker

by Linda Haldeman



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**F**iorenza liked to talk as she fitted the girls for their costumes, and they for the most part liked to listen. The old costumer was full of anecdotes, some familiar, some fantastic, tales of the long lost golden age when she had been a prima donna somewhere, one never found out quite where, in the Italian provinces.

"Ah, I do not like it, *signorine*, the *Tosca*," she muttered

through a mouthful of straight pins, a feat that the girls of the chorus attributed to ventriloquism. "Such an ugly story. *Come brutta*. 'That shabby little shocker,' one critic have called it."

"Seems pretty tame compared to some of the movies around now," observed Alicia, leader of the alto section, raising her arms in cross fashion to allow for the fitting of a gusset.

"At least old Tosca wasn't one of those wimpy virgin sopranos, all head tones and insulted virtue. It must be a great part to play. Did you ever sing Tosca, Madam Fe?"

"*Una volta*," the old woman sighed with gusto. "I sing the Tosca once only and never again. *No davvero*. No. A terrible, terrible thing."

The girls in the chorus exchanged looks. A story. What could all this broken Italian lamentation mean but a certain prelude to a story? But not one of those minor backstage anecdotes, spun off in lyric mock English while turning hems and pinning gathers. This promised to be a major tale, a full evening of revelation made only after a good meal and much wine.

"Hey, gang, I've got an idea," someone exclaimed with unconvincing spontaneity. "Let's all go to Antonio's Trattoria tonight. All the manicotti you can eat." She waited for the others to pick up her cue and conjure some genuine enthusiasm for manicotti before she took the next step. "How about it, Madame Fe? Want to come along? My treat."

Madame Fe was a hungry old woman and a lonely one. How could she refuse? It would not be the first time she had sung for her supper.

From Antonio's they went to Alicia's apartment, a handful of girls from the chorus. The serious ones like Alicia herself, who dreamed of singing the great roles on the great stages, and the wide-eyed opera groupies, who worshipped anyone who had sung the great roles on the great stages and sighed and stammered over anyone who had sung any role on any stage. Alicia arranged them all in a circle on the floor, with Fiorenza enthroned like a bard in the center, and passed among them plastic glasses filled with cheap chianti. The night was too far gone and they had drunk too much to waste good wine.

Fiorenza arranged herself carefully, spreading her wide peasant skirt around her, a prima donna once more, for a while.

"I was good in my time," she said quietly. "But for the *Tosca* I maybe would be great. Had God blessed me with voice only, as so many He has, some day maybe I would have sing at the Met with all the other ugly sopranos. But no, He have to make me *bella*, *bellissima*. You believe that? Old Fiorenza a great beauty? Ah, *é vero*, *é vero*. They love me, the men, before ever I open my mouth. *Capito?* I was like la Tosca in those day, exploding with the love and the

art. I could even act, and singers in those day was not expected to act. Macero, he was my Cavaradossi, he couldn't act the far end of the horse. You know il Macero, no? Vincente Macero, *primo tenore assoluto*. He look like the *grosso* wine barrel, stand on the middle of the stage like it is the concert hall and just bellow out. His *amori* and his *maledizioni* all sound same. Ah, but such a *bello* bellow!" Fiorenza giggled at her clumsy bilingual pun. "And so good a lover, barrel belly and all." She giggled again, catching the startled look of one of the groupies, a first soprano with a promising D natural. "Ah, *si, mia cara*, I made love with il Macero. I made love with all my tenors. It is good for the performance. Not that I advise it for you, *carissime*." She held her glass out for a refill. "I tell you this tale, this 'shabby little shocker,' as a warning. If God grant you to sing la Tosca, do not forget that you only play. The opera she is a strange art; she is just the show, but so great a show. Sometimes she is like the great fearsome rite calling up the pagan gods of old. And that is dangerous to do. The wise men, they disturb not these things but let them sleep. La Tosca, she was not the first to kill and die because of the art. We come of a long line. And

I was so like Floria Tosca in those day. I killed through the power and wiles of those wicked old gods, and I carry their curse.

"It was Macero's fault, you know. If God have granted him a smaller belly and a larger brain, we maybe all have could be spared. Ah, the tenors, *care*, beware of them.

"He was a dreadful man, Macero. I was young and full of art and ambition. He was, how is it, center age, and oh so temperamental. All the time he fight with director, fight with maestro, fight with the baritone, everybody he fight with but me. Me he make love with, not much the difference.

"It was last week of rehearsal. Macero he is throwing the fits. He said how the baritone roughed him so much in the second act. I don't know what he expect from Scarpia, head of secret police, interrogating a rebel. But I say Macero pay no thought to the drama. He liked to watch me, though, in that scene. Everybody watched me, even in rehearsal. I was so great a Tosca. Never forget that thing. I was so beautiful, so *furiosa*, forced to give my body to that weasel Scarpia to save my lover. And I sing the '*Vissi d'Arte*,' lying on my belly on the stage. They give me *brave* even at rehearsal, I am so good. Then I

take the knife from the table. This production I am to back up into the table and touch the knife like by accident. That was not easy to do without the looking, staring all the time at Scarpia with such hate and watching the prompter out of the edge of the eye. Opera, it is not the easy art, *care*. Sometimes I get so excited that I stabbed the poor lad hard enough to hurt, though the knife was of course the stage trick. Did he complain I am rough? Oh no. All the complaining that the production could hold was complained by my dear Macero. He drove that poor young man away. Macero said, 'He goes or I go.' He was Macero. So the baritone went. But for that the baritone went I could have sing Tosca at La Scala and later also the Metropolitan, and now would I be singing benefit concerts at the Carnegie Hall instead of sewing the flounces on the chorus girls. You have more wine, *per favore? Grazie*.

"He was an American, the *nuovo* Scarpia. A wild sort of person, very tall and thin with a such long face and a such long nose. Not a pretty fellow this, but so very an actor. I do not meet him but for shake hands before we rehearse. He scared me when he came on stage. You know the scene—the sacristan and choirboys are mischieving

around the church, and old Scarpia comes and everything stops all at the once. It did. Everything did. Not just on stage, everywhere. I have the scene at the end of the act where he talks so kind while he be's so cruel. I almost couldn't sing I am so terrified. When the maestro laid down his baton he took one breath and shook like the wet dog, and the evil was gone. Then this baritone he walked back to me with a so dear little boy smile on his long face.

"*Bravissima, madama*. You are a great singer and a great actress.' And he kissed my hand. Then he leaned down (he is so tall) and whispered, 'Who's the soufflé playing Cavaradossi? I've seen ripe tomatoes with more expression.'

"I try hard not to giggle. 'That is the great Macero himself. You must treat him with respect, or he will get you fired.'

"He laughed. It was not pleasant. 'He better not tangle with me. I'll dip him in batter and fry him in lard. But enough of him, and I do mean enough. You and I must be better acquainted. I'm Dirk McCready. You are?'

"*Fiorenza Palmieri*.'

"*'Fiorenza?'* He laughed, pleasant this time. 'No, rather Fierenza, my little Italian wild-cat.'

"Imagine that. He tried to make the Italian pun. And he is an Irishman from Chicago. It was not good Italian, but I do not tell him that.

"'Have dinner with me tonight, Fierenza *mia*,' he said. 'To work well together we must get to know each other better.'

"Macero is expecting me to go with him, naturally, but before I could explain this, the tenor he come to us, scowling mightily.

"'Could I interrupt this little convention?' he asked rather nastily. 'I need you, Fiorenza. *Presto!*'

"I went with him as he expected, but I could feel the American's eyes following us, not smiling. As I suspect, Macero was not needing anything, he just wanted to get me away from that Dirk McCready. I mocked him for his jealousy, and we quarreled. Just like Tosca and Cavaradossi. As we took our places for the second act, I tell Dirk yes for dinner, in the hope a bit that Macero would carry his anger onto the stage. But alas, he was stiff and woodlike as always. He alone in all that place have no feel to Dirk's so evil Scarpia. Poor *babbo*, he was a so ridiculous figure, like the great wheel of cheese on elegant banquet table. By end of rehearsal I have lost all respect to him as the

artist and as the man. That was bad. It made the final act so hard. All that passion and joy, I really had to work at it. In my deepdown heart I was glad for Scarpia's—what you say—two-cross. It is not the easy scene for acting. Think on it; the actress has to pretend to be pretending that she thinks her lover is being shot, but she thinks it is not true bullets, what you call, blanks. Then he does not get up, and she knows that dead Scarpia is still doing his evils and that her lover is really shot dead with really bullets. Oh, the irony. It is not shabby; it is so lovely.

"'You know what my deepdown heart said?' I asked Dirk that night as we ate the steak and drank the much wine. 'I wished there were for real bullets in those guns.'

"He laughed that laugh I did not like.

"'Madama, your wish is my command. Nothing is beyond the power and wiles of Scarpia.'

"I laughed too, playing the game. 'And what should we do for a tenor for the second night?'

"'Train a hyena with a high C,' he said.

"We laughed a lot and drank a lot the wine. And somehow we ended the evening at his hotel. And we were lovers, *care*. Never had I made the love with a baritone before. It was most good.

"But not for the opera. In the opera I am suppose to hate the baritone and love the tenor. Ah, what a struggle there was in my deepdown heart. Nothing, *care*, to touch the struggle between my rival lovers.

"Ah, my eyes wetten even now to remember Macero, *poverino*. He was not match for my clever Dirk. It is a knife, like a stiletto, no? this dirk. And such a one was he, my baritone lover, clever as Scarpia but not so evil. How he teased my poor dumb *tenore*. You know how it is those tenors have such ringing head tone. There is no brain up there to interfere with the resonance. Ha, ha. I joke."

The girls sitting around the old diva laughed a trifle stiffly. Alicia pulled another half gallon of wine out of the refrigerator. "Did you dump the empty-headed tenor?" she prodded.

"Oh, no. I could not bring my heart to do that. I loved him, you see. He was so the little child inside. I could not bear the second act, though I always watched it. How I hated Dirk when he was the Scarpia, like I think that Tosca hated him, with something else, too. Something of sex maybe. When I took that knife onstage, I in truth wanted to kill him for being so cruel and so smug when he is Scarpia, and being so hard on poor Macero when he is Dirk.

"Everything came out for bad, as it must soon or after, at the dress rehearsal. Dirk, that wicked one, came to my dressing room before the second act when I am in only my unspeakables. I tell him this is against rules backstage. It is for bad luck. He but laughed.

"'What for do we need rules, you and I,' he said. 'We break all the rules.' And he my dresser sent away. 'I dress you myself, Fierenza *mia*. This Scarpia gets everything he's after, even his Tosca.' And he dressed me in the red velvet gown of my costume as no performer have ever been dressed. That is how I am loving him even as I am hating him. There are men like that, cruel, charming men that treat women so, like the street ladies, and women find strange pleasure in them. It is in such a way that I loved Dirk McCready.

"When he had fastened my gown with many wicked carresses and arranged my wig, he took the cameo on black ribbon and tied it around my neck. I stood before the mirror, he behind me. I could see reflected his face over my shoulder. It was a very Scarpia face. Slowly he tightened the black ribbon around my neck.

"'You are still seeing (only he used another word, not so nice as "seeing") Winnie-the-Pooh?"



"I never know why he called Macero by that name, but I knew that is who he meant. The ribbon was so tight I could not speak. The door opened all on the sudden. Behold Macero, very red in the *facê*.

"*'Assassino! Get you out of here,'* he shouted. 'You do not belong in this place. You do all the wicked you want onstage. When curtain is down you leave this *donna mia* alone.'

"*'Donna you-a? Not by a lot,'* Dirk speak very quiet but very cruel. 'You got no claim on this rare jewel. You are the little man.' Only that is not how he really says. I cannot say to young ladies the word he used *in vero*. Poor Macero, no one ever talk to him in this manner.

"Macero scream at him. 'You are bastard. I kill you!'

"Now Macero he was the big man, and when he ran at Dirk, I bob out of the way. I think I'm screaming then because Dirk is jumping back to my dressing table and grabbing the dress-maker scissor. Macero hold hard his wrist to make him drop it, then they roll on the floor hitting and punching.

"It took the stage manager and the director and two stagehands to pull them apart. They both had got bloody faces, very ugly. The director scowled at all of us, even me, as if it is my fault that men fight over me.

"*'I have no care,'* say the director, 'what you do in your privacies. But it is no to be carried into theater. We have a show to put on tomorrow, and nothing matter before that. *Capito?* You three ones stay away from each the other except when you are on stage together. If it is not so, I will see that none of you never sing on any stage in Italy, in the world maybe.'

"Oh, how terrible a threat, terrible because like a curse it came to pass. Dirk broke free from the stagehands and shook off himself, all cool and contempt, you know. Macero, he could not go cool. The stagehands they pulled him out of the room.

"*'I kill you, bastard,'* he called, blood running down his poor fat chin.

"*'We see who kills who,'* Dirk called back over his shoulder as he went to his dressing room. 'Not to worry,' he say to the director. 'The show will go on, yours and mine.'

"It was not a pretty scene, I tell you. And the rehearsal as it continued was not pretty, either. Scarpia got very rough with Cavaradossi during the interrogation, and Cavaradossi at the '*Vittoria!*' took himself Baron Scarpia by the shoulders and shook him. The director screamed '*Basta!*' and leaped up onto stage. 'What you doing?

You crazy? Nobody dare touch this man. He is most powerful man in Rome. You do not try for to act, Macero. Just you sing, *capito*? Go on now, mae-stro.'

"By end of that rehearsal I was one nervous wreck and just went home. I not want to go out with anybody. I stand those two bad boys together and try to make them have the peace. When they will not, at least I make them promise to stay away from each other.

"'For you, *bellissima*, I do anything,' said my baritone. 'You I promise that I will not speak to or touch this bloated leech again for not just tonight but for the rest of his putrid life, however long that may be. Your wish is my command.' Then made he a deep bow and kiss my hand, and off he went, smiling just a little, how Scarpia smile when he make the trick with the shooting.

"'Now you go home as well,' I told Macero, 'and make not more trouble.'

"'I go then, *cara*. For you I go home. But I will have the *vendetta*. How he say—not to worry. The show she will go on. Not a word to the laughing hyena, not a blow. But he will pay, fear you not. *Buona notte*.'

"Can you imagine the night I spent? And I with an opening night before me. But what they

say about the show is so true, especially of the opera. When I went to the theater, all did seem to be well. They were both there already and in their dressing rooms, and there was not trouble. Still I am nervous. When I come on in the first act to meet my lover at the church, he give me a most strange smile, like we are in a plot together. That made me so nervous I am missing my cue, and the prompter nearly jump out of his box to get me back in tempo. But cover it I did. I was an artist, *in vero*. But the Scarpia as he exit after the scene with the fan leaned close to me and whisper, 'Your wish is my command.'

"All the intermission I stay in my dressing room trying to call back my character. After all, I am Floria Tosca, the great actress. I am brave and strong. What happen on stage is all that matters this night. I must forget all else. So I tell myself, and so I believe. I went on in the second act with free mind, and I played well. Those two also were playing straight, and it was a good act. Even poor Macero was not so wooden. I sang the '*Vissi d'Arte*' and meant it, and as triumphing Scarpia came to claim me I backed up to that dining table and touched the knife, just where it was to be. That is always a bad moment. One must pray that the

property mistress have not slip up. It was there and I grabbed the handle. I never looked at it, that stage knife with the collapsing blade. I play the scene, and I am Tosca. I raised the knife and struck his chest, shouting the line about Tosca's kiss. Something was wrong. The blade do not collapse. I don't understand. Dirk make such a strange sound, like nothing he do in rehearsal, and I pull the knife out. But I don't scream. I am, so to say, in the shock. Dirk is gasping, holding onto me with such a strong grip. His face is close to me, very white.

"He cries, '*Aiuto! Muoio!*' right on cue and manages in the five and a half beat rest he has to whisper to me, 'Do the scene.' Then he cry, '*Succorso*' perfect in tempo. What an artist. We do the scene, just so. And were we magnificent! No one knew except the poor prompter, who dropped the baton when he see blood and lose his place. But we needed not the prompter. It was our scene, and we played it. It is a blessedly short scene. I am standing over him, snarling, '*Muouri, dannato!*' and watching him die. He sighs and then lies still as he is suppose to, but the blood is going all over the place. This scene cannot be hurried. It must be done with the music. I put the candles by him and the crucifix on the chest.

Then I tippytoe out as the orchestra rises to its final chord. I could hear the applause as I collapsed into Macero's fat arms. He is there, watching. Quickly I recovered and pulled away from him. Now I knew.

"'You. You do this terrible thing. You come here early and put a real knife on property table. This is your vendetta, wicked one.'

"He is smiling but not happy. 'He has ruined all with his show-go-on. I meant to destroy him, not make him the legend. Now will they tell his story wherever this opera is played. But at least I save you from him.'

"'You make me a murderer. Go from me!'

"I hurried back onstage. Dirk was struggling, trying to get up. He gripped onto the director as he had gripped me.

"'Hospital all right,' he gasped, 'but not police. Don't stop the show. It must go on. Promise me. Promise.'

"Then he saw me. 'Ah, *fi-erENZA mia*, you are a great diva. Kiss me while I can still feel your lips. We play one great scene together, don't we?'

"I kissed him. Already his lips were cold. 'Play the last act well, my love. It will be a great triumph, yours and mine. You will see.'

"The ambulance came to take

him away, though we all knew he was dying. He held hard my hand.

"'We have much fun together,' he whispered. 'Don't forget what once I said. Your wish is my command. Still is.'"

"Then they carried him off, and I—I never saw him again. The third act curtain was delayed somewhat so that the stagehands could clean up some the blood, but the show goes on. The director asked me was I all right. I could not more than nod, I was so whelmed over. He asked Macero the same, and he said he never felt the better. Ah, how I understand la Tosca when she sing '*Vissi d'Arte*.' Here must I be a great actress indeed, singing joyous love duets with my lover's killer, setting aside my grief for later. I was good. I was very good, for Dirk would have me so. Macero was better than usual, crowing in the triumph of his vendetta. For Scarpia is dead, and he is glad. And that is how he is supposed to sing it. From the upstage I watched his bravado before the firing squad, and I made again the curse I gave at rehearsal. May the bullets be real. It was only then that I understood what Dirk was meaning, 'Your wish is my command.'"

"Could I have stop it, you ask? There might have been

time had I have screamed out and stop the show. But I have promise Dirk. And—and in those few measures before the shots I knew I did not want to stop it. Don't you see, *carissime*, how beautiful it is, like a great tragedy that must be played out? Dead Scarpia reaching out for his vendetta. Never has there been such a night in all time of theater. You have more the wine?"

Alicia, struggling back to reality as from a dream, shook her head.

"Sorry. We're all out. But—but what happened to you?"

"I go to the prison for twenty years. No Italian judge would hang me, of course. But all were sure I am the murderer of both. I do not tell them otherwise. To what purpose? My professional life, and so my life, was over after such a scandal. And I feel in my deepdown heart that I am the culprit *in vero*. They kill for me; they die for me; they get their inspiration from me. There is a comfort of sorts in that. And I have the easy time in prison, for the governor, a very Scarpia himself, kept me well, and I sang recitals for his parties. Always I sang for him the '*Vissi d'Arte*.' Always I looked just at him, but he never let on if he understood. By the time I am let out, the scandal is over and

all have forgotten, but all have forgotten me as well, and my voice is no longer so great. That is why I come to this country and make costumes for the great divas and" (she smiled with foggy graciousness) "the *piccole divezze*. But now the wine is gone, and my story is done. I go."

"It's very late," Alicia said. "Why don't you let us call a cab or just sleep here until someone can walk you home?"

"Oh, no." The old woman rose with surprising agility for her age and state of intoxication. "Always I walk alone. That is best. *Buona notte*."

And she floated off into the night like a theater wraith.

**S**tella Briganza was singing her first Lucia, and she was nervous, struggling with a minor bronchial infection and the inexperienced performer's fear of the critic and the fan.

"You are shaking, *ma petite*," her dresser murmured as she carefully arranged the Lammormoor tartan around her pale shoulders. "A great artist must forget personal fear before her art. And you are going to be a great artist."

"You think so?" Stella whis-

pered. "I don't know if I'm ready for a part like this. Vocally I think I'm okay. But I don't know how to play the role. It's so far from real life. I mean who would really marry a man she didn't like just because she was gullible enough to believe her conniving brother's lies about her true lover? And then instead of running off with her lover she goes crazy and stabs her husband on the wedding night. That's freaky. I can't relate to that."

"Ah, no, *ma chère*. You are so young." Her dresser, a veteran of the French stage, sighed. "Such things do happen, even in these free times. I know. But that is another story, and no one for your young ears. Come, I will show you how I did the Mad Scene when I was young and had so lovely the upper register."

"You sang Lucia?" Stella exclaimed. "I never knew that."

"It was so very long ago, *ma chère*. Everyone has forget now. I was after so long in the hospital mental. I sing it only once, the Lucia. But it was so great a performance. But that is another story. I tell you one day. Not now. Now you must go out and make your own history. The tenor awaits you."

FICTION

# Ms. Household Wiz

by Gary Alexander



Illustration by George Thompson

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**D**ear Ms. Household Wiz: First I got to say how much I love your newspaper column. I read it every day even if I don't read anything else in the paper. I don't guess you'll have time to answer this question of mine, seeing that you must get thousands and thousands of letters, but here goes anyway.

What my problem is, is a big rip in this wool sweater and I can't fix it myself because like Charlie says, I don't sew any better than I can cook, but if you saw Charlie's gut you'd realize he's out of line about my cooking, though I haven't the foggiest notion how to repair the sweater.

It's what you'd call an heirloom, having been knitted by my grandma and passed down to my mom, then to me, Lord rest both their souls. How it got tore, I don't want to sound like I'm blaming anybody, there being two sides to every story and you're only hearing mine, but things started going from bad to worse after Charlie's mother moved in with us after Earl, that's Charlie's dad, died. Charlie, he didn't want to put her in some home and I could see his point there, but Ruth, that's her name, and me never did hit it off and her being in the house makes things worse between Charlie and me, not

that they've been great lately anyhow, because Ruth takes his side on everything even if he's wrong which, as far as I'm concerned, is most of the time, but that's another story and here I am rambling on about something I shouldn't be bothering you about.

Anyway, Charlie's drinking even more than usual since he got laid off at the mill. One night he came home from drinking at the tavern with the boys in a real ugly mood. Ruth and me, we were watching TV (*Love Boat* was on and it's kind of nice to have a program we like so we got an excuse not to talk to each other) and I said to Charlie that maybe he shouldn't drink so much especially when he's behind the wheel, and Charlie told me to shut my blankety-blank mouth.

I said I wasn't trying to start trouble, but with money as tight as it was for us, maybe he could drink at home if he had to and that I didn't mind if he did. Charlie said something else I also won't repeat word for word and when I got up to go in the kitchen to make him a pot of coffee he grabbed me by the sleeve, spun me around, and slapped me, slapped me hard.

Well, Charlie's batted me around before but it never hurt as much as it did that time and worse than the pain is the tear



I got in my sweater when he grabbed me, which is why I'm writing this letter to you.

Charlie stomped off to bed and Ruth went in behind him. She was gone a while and after she came out she gave me this lecture on how hard it is for a man when he loses his job and can't support his family without the dole and how if I was a good wife I'd be more understanding instead of nagging him all the time.

Anyway, I just don't know how to begin on that sweater and I sure don't want to toss it in the rag bin. So can you help? I'd really appreciate it.

Very sincerely yours,  
Don't Know What To Do

To Don't Know What To Do:

Your letter was too lengthy to print, but your problem—a precious heirloom wool sweater that has been damaged—is not an impossible one.

Make contact with a knitting or sewing circle or club. I'll bet you'll find somebody who will repair the sweater for a nominal fee. The bulletin board at your local library or the community activities editor of your newspaper would be good sources.

Ms. Household Wiz

Dear Ms. Household Wiz:

Reading your answer in print

is just about the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me!!!!

I called all my friends and told them.

Since you were so generous, I hate to be a pest again but here goes. This is a problem I probably made for myself yacking over you to half the county and if I had it to do over I wouldn't of made such a big deal out of it.

Charlie'd ran the pickup into a ditch couple of nights ago and he'd been at the gas station that towed it trying to make it driveable but he couldn't and he walked home in one of his moods telling me how Mrs. Harkness, who came in for gas, mentioned how famous I was and how Mrs. Jonathan, a really nice lady I met through a knitting circle notice at the library just like you said, had done such a great job on the sweater (which she did!) for only twenty dollars.

Charlie, he started ranting and raving about our money situation and that I had plenty of other clothes to wear and I lost my temper and did some screaming of my own, telling him that Mrs. Jonathan worked on it two full days, which was pretty darn cheap as far as I was concerned.

Ruth was standing right there and said I had other clothes I could wear and don't yell at her

son when I was the one being so selfish. I said that Ruth had collected life insurance on Earl and a cashout on part of his pension fund and if she was so worried about money she could contribute that or more of her Social Security than she does to pay for her room and board, unless she already is, slipping Charlie his booze money because I don't know how else he could afford to spend half the night at the tavern with his buddies, drinking and shooting pool and playing cards.

Well, to make a long story short, I'm not going to trouble you about my loose teeth. They're feeling better and they'll be as good as new before you know it if I'm careful about what I eat for a while.

But the bloodstains on my favorite blouse, the only one I got fit to wear in public, won't come out. It's a cotton and polyester blend and real pretty. Can you help?

Very sincerely yours,  
Don't Know What To Do

Dear Don't Know What To Do:

Since the blood has dried, it may be too late. But let's give it the old college try.

Soak it in cold water until the stain lightens. Then wash it in warm soapy water. If there is no improvement, try bleach as a last resort, applying it to the

stained area with an eyedropper. Then rinse well.

Best,  
Ms. Household Wiz

Dear Ms. Household Wiz:

It's just a double thrill getting a personal letter from you and I'm going to frame it whether Ruth and Charlie like it or not!!! Most of the blood came out doing it the way you said and since it's a paisley pattern with lots of burgundy and gold I don't think anybody'll ever notice.

Forgive me for being a pest but this question pertains to them, which should shut them up on the subject of me being selfish if you can help.

Bad teeth run in their side of the family, so they both wear dentures. At the dinner table the other night I happened to mention without meaning any nastiness how yellow they were getting, Ruth's and Charlie's. Maybe I said it wrong but they got all upset. Charlie didn't belt me, but he said some blankety-blank words, threw down his fork, got his coat, and left.

Ruth isn't speaking to me. That would be okay except that the TV's busted and Ruth, the miser she is, hasn't offered to pay to have it fixed. Charlie doesn't care. He watches his football at the tavern on their big screen.

If I could get on Ruth's good side, it'd be better than staring at a blank wall. They put their dentures in glasses at night, side by side next to the medicine cabinet. It's always been my motto that if you look better you feel better. If I could whiten up their teeth (without them knowing about it is probably the way to go) maybe they'd cheer up.

I know it's a dumb idea, but I got to start somewhere. I can't take much more of this. Can you help?

Very sincerely yours,  
Don't Know What To Do

Dear Don't Know:

Enclosed is a short list of chemicals, any of which might do the trick. Over-the-counter denture cleaners are usually effective, but apparently your loved ones have let the problem go on too long. Many abrasive products on the market can effectively remove discoloration, but you indicate that you wish to be passively involved, so we must rule those out.

I assume that your town is too small to have a chemical

supply house, so I recommend you visit a larger city to purchase them. Even if chemicals are sold locally, by a pharmacy or whatnot, I'd still advise the big city outlets, for their selection would be greater.

Please be aware that the chemicals are deadly poisons and must be thoroughly washed from the dentures before reinsertion in the mouth. They are colorless, odorless, and tasteless, and in event of illness, they would be difficult for a physician to trace. Any carelessness could be potentially fatal!

By the way, I'm flattered that you're framing my last letter. I ask you, however, to destroy this one. As I stated earlier, the chemicals are extremely toxic. If they fell into the wrong hands and my instructions weren't followed, the consequences could be tragic.

Best,  
Ms. Household Wiz

Dear Ms. Household Wiz:

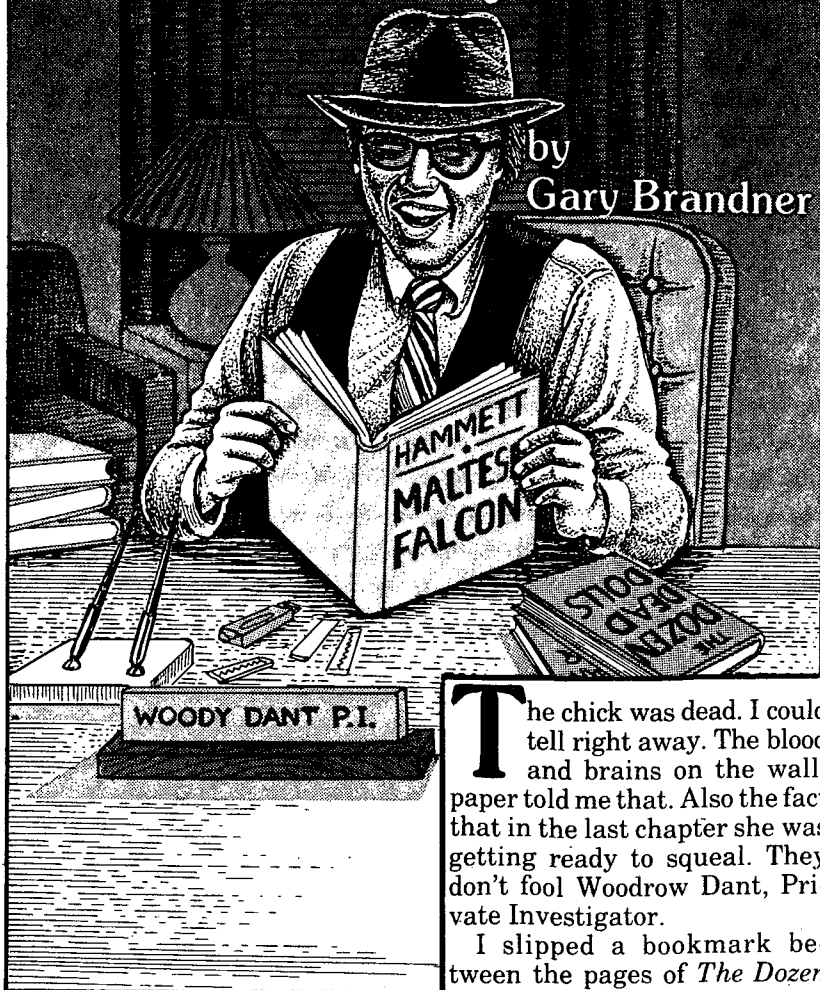
Thanks.

Very sincerely yours,  
Know What To Do

FICTION

# The Wet Goodbye

by  
Gary Brandner



**T**he chick was dead. I could tell right away. The blood and brains on the wall-paper told me that. Also the fact that in the last chapter she was getting ready to squeal. They don't fool Woodrow Dant, Private Investigator.

I slipped a bookmark between the pages of *The Dozen*

*Dead Dolls* and put it on the shelf behind my desk along with the Hammett, Chandler, Spillane, Macdonald, and Parker books. I leaned back in the creaky swivel chair and admired the framed diploma from the Kingsley Correspondence School of Detection. I swiveled around to where I could read my name backwards through the frosted glass door. Nobody came in the door. For thirty straight days since I had talked Mrs. Bonaduce out of the first month's rent, nobody had walked in the door. I wondered what I was doing wrong. By now there should have been half a dozen dishy blondes and a couple of guys with bullets in their guts.

I got up and strolled over to the sink with the twin yellow stains running from the faucets to the drain. I looked at myself in the cracked mirror. I was tall enough. Maybe I could stand a little more bulk in the chest and shoulders, but at twenty-two I still had time to fill out. I squinted into the glass and gave myself the steely look I'd been practicing. Not bad, but it needed work. I rubbed my jaw. Yeah, that was a problem. The pale yellow fuzz did not make it as a Bogarty stubble. Maybe I could darken it with pencil shavings or something.

The door opened.

I whirled from the mirror with a hand inside my jacket. My hand grabbed nothing but shirt. In my state you can get a private eye license for a few bucks, but they're sticky about gun permits.

Mrs. Bonaduce looked at me. "Who are you today . . . Napoleon?"

I pulled my hand out and looked steely at her. Mrs. Bonaduce was not impressed. My landlady was a large woman with suspicious eyes and a fine mustache. Standing a little behind her was a chinless geek in a three-piece brown suit.

"It's the end of the month," said Mrs. Bonaduce.

I looked up at my wall calendar with the print of Mt. Rushmore. "So it is," I agreed.

"You got the rent?"

"Well . . ."

She turned to the geek. "You can move in tomorrow, Mr. Pritikin. As you can see, the present tenant don't have much in the way of belongings to move out."

"I'm Eldon Pritikin," the geek told me, not offering to shake hands.

I scowled at him.

"Mr. Pritikin is a certified accountant," Mrs. Bonaduce said. "He is going to move into this office. He is also going to marry my daughter Amity."

"Good for him," I said, though

I could not care less. "Mrs. Bonaduce, if you give me another week, I've got a feeling business will pick up . . ."

"Pick up?" she scoffed. "Your business would have to pick up to be a disaster. How many clients you had? Don't bother to tell me. I know. Zero. You call yourself a detective?"

I pointed at the lettering on the door.

Mrs. Bonaduce stroked her mustache thoughtfully. To the geek she said, "How soon you want to be in here, Mr. Pritikin?"

"Actually, there's no great hurry," Eldon told her. "I'm paid up a month in advance where I am."

"You hear that, Mr. Private Eye? Paid in advance. That's the kind of tenant I want."

I tried lighting a cigarette. It made me cough as always, and I stubbed it out. I shoved a stick of Juicy Fruit in my mouth. Not the same effect, but it would have to do.

"Tell you what, Sherlock Holmes," said my landlady, "if you do a job for me, maybe I'll let you stay a couple more weeks."

"Job?" I said, chomping down on the gum.

"My daughter Amity been going out three nights a week and won't tell me where. She won't even tell her fiancé, Mr.

Pritikin. Not that she would ever do anything wrong, you understand, but we'd just like to know what she's up to."

"Discreetly, of course," said the geek.

"You want me to put a tail on her?"

"No, Mr. Smart Pants Detective, I want you to follow her and find out what she's doing."

I pulled on the lobe of one ear. "Well, I suppose . . ."

Mrs. Bonaduce walked over to my window. "You ever seen my daughter?"

"No."

"Come here and take a look."

I ambled over to the greasy window and looked down one floor to the street. Coming up the sidewalk was a girl of about nineteen with short glossy black hair, a lean, whippy body, and dark eyes that burned with a strange fire. I could feel the heat she generated all the way up in my office. How this dish could be related to the mustachioed Mrs. Bonaduce was a biological mystery.

"I'll take the case," I said.

"No messing around with Amity," her mother warned.

Eldon Pritikin cleared his throat in agreement.

"Just find out where she goes at night and you've earned yourself two more weeks."

"Leave it to me," I growled, still eyeballing the dark-haired

girl as she entered the building on the ground floor.

The very next night Amity Bonaduce slipped out, and I was ready. I thought about tailing her on my Honda, but decided that'd attract attention. Instead, I used Shadowing Technique No. 1—lounging in a doorway pretending to read a newspaper with my eyes hidden behind dark shades. When Amity came out of the building, I strolled along behind her. Actually, it was more of a lope than a stroll. The girl had long legs and a good stride on her. I kept pace, stumbling now and then when the shades obscured my vision.

She got on a Number 9 bus. So did I. She sat in the front. I stood in the back peeking around my newspaper. She got off downtown. I rode a block farther, then galloped back to catch up with her. Technique No. 4.

Amity walked another two blocks with me close behind. She went into a building that was a school during the day and rented out rooms at night. I speeded up in time to see her go into Room 121. A directory told me that Room 121 held a three-times-a-week acting class conducted by somebody named Felix Fairman.

My job was finished. I could now tell Mrs. Bonaduce and the

geek that Amity was engaged in nothing more sinister than acting lessons. But since I had time on my hands, I decided to hang around until she came out. Now that the case was closed, I wouldn't mind knowing the dark-eyed girl on a more personal level.

It was a long class, over three hours, and I was on my second pack of Juicy Fruit when the door opened and the aspiring actors and actresses trooped out. Amity Bonaduce was not among them.

I adjusted my shades and sidled over to the open classroom door. Inside Amity was talking to a hollow-eyed individual with a beard and a black turtleneck sweater. Felix Fairman, the teacher, I deduced.

I moseyed back to the entrance to wait for her and saw I was not the only one waiting. One of the acting students, a bull-shouldered lout in a grubby sweatshirt, was still hanging around. When Amity came out, he shuffled toward her.

"You wanna come uppa my place an' run lines?" he mumbled.

"I don't think so," Amity said.

"Hey, c'mon, I gotta bottla wine," said the oaf.

I was wondering if I should stroll over and rearrange the guy's face, and got as far as doing a Cagney hitch of the



pants before Amity spoke up.

"Not tonight," she said with a snap of finality.

The beefcake shrugged and shambled away.

Before I could get back behind my newspaper, Amity turned and looked at me. Those dark, intense eyes bored through the paper and through the shades into my brain. She came toward me.

"Why are you following me?" she asked.

"*No hablo inglés,*" I muttered, trying to look Latin.

"Cut it out, I know who you are. You're the kook with the Honda who rented the office upstairs and calls himself a detective."

I gave her a grin and she stepped on it.

"So why are you following me?"

I slid my lip up and down on my teeth, Bogart style. "I'm a man and you're a woman."

She rolled those sensational eyes. "First that clod Ryne Locklear hits on me and now I get you doing bad impressions. There must be a full moon. And take off those ridiculous sunglasses."

I fumbled the shades off my nose and into a pocket.

"If you want to walk with me," she said, "walk *with* me. And quit lurking in and out of doorways."

I marched along at her pace to the bus stop and we rode together back to the building managed by her mother. Amity gave me a cool goodnight and went into the Bonaduce apartment. I trudged upstairs to my office where I was currently sleeping on a cot. When I finally got to sleep the dream was worth waiting for.

The next day I made my report to Mrs. Bonaduce, and she seemed satisfied, but Eldon Pritikin cornered me afterward in my office. "About this acting class," he said, "do you think Amity is . . . seeing anybody there?"

I gave him my Clint Eastwood squint and shrugged. "I don't get you."

"I mean, could Amity be involved with . . . another man? She's been acting kind of cool lately."

"I couldn't say," I told him.

"Can you find out?"

I jerked my head toward the door where it said PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR. "Finding stuff out is my business."

"I'll pay you, of course," he said. "What's your price?"

I named a figure. He blanched. I named a lower figure. He said okay.

What, I asked myself, was the best way to find out if Amity Bonaduce was getting it on

with anybody in her acting class? Easy, I told myself: join the class. Since there was no more need to be furtive, I fired up my Honda the following night and took off for the school.

Luckily, the class was sponsored by the city, so the fee was small and the structure loose enough to let me in a couple of weeks late. If Amity Bonaduce was thrilled by my being there, she kept it a secret. Ryne Locklear and the other would-be thespians ignored me. Felix Fairman, the instructor, treated me like something ugly was growing out of my nose.

I sat in the rear during the first class trying to stay awake while Fairman babbled on about motivation and the Stanislavsky Method, and my fellow students took turns pretending to be somebody or something they were not. If I am any judge, Amity Bonaduce was excellent, but Ryne Locklear should forget about show business.

Excitement picked up considerably when the door burst open and a tightly wound woman with too much makeup charged into the room. She was as thin as twisted cable, and her red hair was sprayed into an elaborate arrangement of twists and curls.

Felix Fairman went pale under his beard as the woman made for him.

"You took the convertible!" she accused. Her voice was like pulling a rusty nail out of a board. "You knew I wanted to use the convertible!"

Fairman threw an uneasy glance at his goggling students. "I'm sorry, Christine, I forgot."

"Oh, yes, you did!" screeched the redhead. "You probably wanted to use it to impress one of your tootsies."

"Christine, I'm in the middle of a class. Let's talk about this at home."

"You're damn right we will!" Christine informed him. "And you can get there in your crummy station wagon. I left it outside. I'm taking the convertible. It is mine, you know. And so are the house and the boat, for that matter."

"We'll discuss it *later*," Fairman said through a clenched beard. He grabbed the redhead's arm and steered her out of the room while she yammered at him every step of the way.

As soon as the door closed behind them, the class crowded over to the windows to catch the rest of the scene. Out at the curb, some forty yards across the lawn, a grubby ten-year-old wagon was parked behind a shiny new Chrysler with a white vinyl top. Fairman and the woman crossed the grass, gesticulating and arguing loud

enough to quiet the crickets. The redhead snatched what I supposed were car keys from his hand, leaped into the Chrysler, and drove off. The show over, we students went back to our seats and practiced looking innocent.

Fairman returned and gave us a weak smile through his beard. "Marriage," he quoted, "is like a bath in a steaming tub. Once you get used to it, it's not so hot."

We all chuckled dutifully, and in a little while Fairman dismissed the class.

My plans to offer Amity Bonaduce a ride were shattered when Fairman asked the cast of a sketch they were preparing to remain after class. Unfortunately, the cast included Amity and the hulk, Ryne Locklear. I hung around outside looking steely-eyed until it gave me a headache, then I went home.

**T**he class two days later was a loss in a number of ways. First, Amity Bonaduce was not there, which took away what small interest I had in the proceedings. Also, I didn't think much of holding the class out on the lawn in the chilly night, which was Felix Fairman's bright idea. It would bring us closer to nature, he said, which struck me as pretty stupid.

No sooner were we under way on the lawn than the Chrysler convertible screeched to a stop down at the curb. The tangle of red hair, clashing with a bright orange scarf, bobbed angrily under the street light. The Chrysler's horn blatted a summons.

Fairman excused himself and trotted to the street, where he leaned into the open car, apparently trying to quiet the squawking redhead. Their voices floated up to us, though the words were indistinct. All I made out was something about the boat, then she roared off in a cloud of hair spray and burning rubber.

Fairman returned without comment, and we proceeded with the class, though his mind seemed to be elsewhere.

An hour or so later I was cold and bored and stiff from sitting on the ground. I had about given up on Amity and was looking for a chance to slip away when the janitor came out of the building and walked over to our little group.

"Anybody here named Dant?" he said.

"That's me," I admitted.

"You got a phone call inside."

Glad for any chance to warm up, I jogged in to take the telephone in the classroom we had vacated.

"Is this Woodrow Dant, the

detective?" a female voice squawked in my ear.

I lowered my natural tone an octave or so. "Who wants to know?"

"This is Christine Fairman. I'm down at our boat. I want to see you right away." The voice was fuzzy, as though she were high on something.

"What about?" I said.

"Something very 'mportant to you. The boat's in Slip 47-at the marina. You can park your mo'rcycle at the top of the ramp."

There was a click and the dial tone buzzed in my ear.

All *right*, I thought, a mysterious phone call. This was starting to shape up like a real private eye case.

I grabbed my helmet from the hook where I'd left it and started for the door.

As I barged out of the classroom, I had to swerve suddenly to keep from running into Amity Bonaduce, who was just hurrying in.

"I had to work late," she said, looking around the empty room. "The class isn't over, is it?"

"They're out on the lawn," I told her.

"Are you leaving?"

"I've got an appointment," I said, shifting the gum from one side of my mouth to the other.

"See you," Amity said, and headed down the hall one way while I went the other.

The run to the marina took me twenty-five minutes, and I was glad for the warmth of my leather jacket. Something about the call from Christine Fairman bothered me, but I was too busy to worry about it. As I roared through the deserted marina parking lot I recognized the Chrysler convertible. Nobody was in it. By the time I stowed the bike at the top of the wooden ramp leading down to Slip 47, my hands were numb. I tucked them under my arms and clattered down the ramp to the cabin cruiser bobbing there at anchor.

Curiously, there were no lights aboard the boat. It was a situation, I knew, that often led to the detective getting bashed over the head from behind. I played it cautious.

"Mrs. Fairman," I called.

No answer. Out on the dark water a bell buoy clanked. Far down the marina I could hear a radio playing, but all the boats seemed deserted. It was not boating weather.

I tried calling again, and when there was still no answer, I stepped aboard. I made my way back along the side deck to the cockpit. Empty. There was enough light from the bulbs strung over the pier for me to see into the cabin. A heavy gin bottle was lying there on its

side. Next to it was an empty glass smeared with lipstick. Not good.

I backed out of the cabin and cleared my throat, which seemed to be tightening up with the cold.

Something creaked behind me. I went into a crouch and whirled, stepping on a wet patch of deck. My feet shot out behind me and my chin came down hard on the edge of the live bait well. Still alert, I rolled over and looked around for the source of the creak. I relaxed when I saw it was just the stern line rubbing against the gunwale. Had it been a couple of hoods with upraised clubs, I would have been ready for them.

As I got to my feet, I spotted something tangled in that stern line that didn't belong there. A bright orange scarf. My inner voice said *Oh-oh, let's get out of here*. But would Mike Hammer have run out?

Moving carefully, I crept to the rail where the scarf was caught and looked down into the dark water. Bobbing there, partly wedged between boat and pier, was Christine Fairman.

*I told you so*, said my inner voice.

With much grunting and puffing I hauled the sodden Mrs. Fairman aboard and looked her over just long enough to

determine that she was dead. Then I ran for a phone booth at the head of the pier and called the police. Taking a position where I could watch the boat without having to sit next to the late Mrs. Fairman, I waited for the cops. I figured I could give them a couple of hours of help in solving the case.

Two days later they turned me loose. Apparently Mrs. Fairman had been hit over the head, probably with the gin bottle, before taking the wet goodbye. Since I was the only one around, the cops grabbed me. Luckily, there was some rule against holding a guy more than forty-eight hours without booking him.

The cops bade me farewell with the advice not to leave town. I answered with the Bogaart lip twitch, which they pretended to think was funny.

When I got back to my building I saw that Mrs. Bonaduce had moved my belongings—desk, chair, calendar, and cot—out into the street so Eldon Pritikin could move into my office.

"I thought you was in jail," said the landlady when I asked her what was the idea.

"Well, I'm out," I told her, "but somebody else will soon be in."

A look flashed between Bon-

aduce and Pritikin, and I hoped I had started them worrying.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I got some thinking to do."

I took my chair down off the desktop, shooed a curious pigeon away, leaned back with my hands clasped behind my head, and ran back over a couple of things that were bothering me.

After thirty minutes of this I got on my bike and tooled over to the school, where I was not surprised to find CANCELED lettered beside tonight's listing for the acting class. I got Felix Fairman's home address from the office and took off for the other side of town.

The house was a tasteful brick job with a neat little lawn and a flagstone walk to the front door. I held my finger on the bell button until an irritable Felix opened the door.

"What do *you* want?" he said.

"Thanks," I said, looking tough. "*I will* come in."

He stood back as I pushed my way into the nicely furnished living room.

"Don't get up," I told Amity Bonaduce, but she was already on her feet in front of the sofa, where there were two fresh dents in the soft cushions. A pair of suitcases stood near the door.

"Going someplace?" I said in a Hammeresque growl.

"I thought you were in jail," Fairman said.

"Sure you did, seeing as that's the way you planned it."

His eyes bounced around the room for a minute before he got control and glared at me. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean you killed your wife and set me up to take the fall."

Fairman gaped at me. Amity gaped at Fairman. I grinned, hard and mean.

"It's no secret that you had a motive. The two of you didn't get along, and she had the money. A setup for murder if there ever was one." I let my steely gaze clank off the recently vacated sofa and the suitcases. "Maybe you had even more of a motive than that."

"Just a minute," Fairman blurted, pumping up his indignation. "I was with my class—twelve witnesses—at the time my wife was killed. They saw her—you saw her—drive up and talk to me. I was still there when the police came to tell me she was dead. I think that's what you call an ironclad alibi."

"That alibi ain't even plastic-wrapped," I said, getting into the spirit. "How can anybody be sure it was your wife we saw? She didn't get out of the car, and all we really saw was red hair and the scarf. It was a cold night to have the top down, un-

less somebody wanted to make sure we got a look."

"But you got a phone call from Christine."

"That didn't have to be her, either. I only heard your wife's voice once, and over the phone it was kind of slurred. You teach acting. You could teach somebody to impersonate your wife."

Amity Bonaduce moved over close to me. "Woody," she breathed, "you don't mean ... me?"

"Sorry, sweetheart, but there were a couple of flaws in your performance. The wig worked at that distance, and the voice was okay, but no woman who went to the trouble of spraying her hair into that elaborate concoction would drive with the top down, no matter what the weather was."

"But, Woody, I was at the school when you got the phone call."

"Yeah, that was a nice touch, and it had me going for a while. But something besides the voice bothered me about that call. Christine Fairman had no way of knowing I drove a motorcycle. But you knew."

They were both staring at me. I shoved a stick of gum in my mouth, milking the mo-

ment. "The way I figure it, Fairman bashed his wife with the gin bottle, smeared the glass, tossed her overboard, and hustled back here to teach the class. He hauled us outside to watch your act, then you drove the convertible out to park it at the marina. You hurried back here and made the call to me, probably from another phone in the building. Then you made sure I saw you as I barreled out."

"You can't prove any of that," Fairman said.

I did the earlobe tug. "Proving things ain't my problem. The city's got some people who are pretty good at that."

Amity made a little mewing sound and put her arms around me. "Woody, you don't have to do this. Christine is dead, and you're not in jail any more. You and I can still make it. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

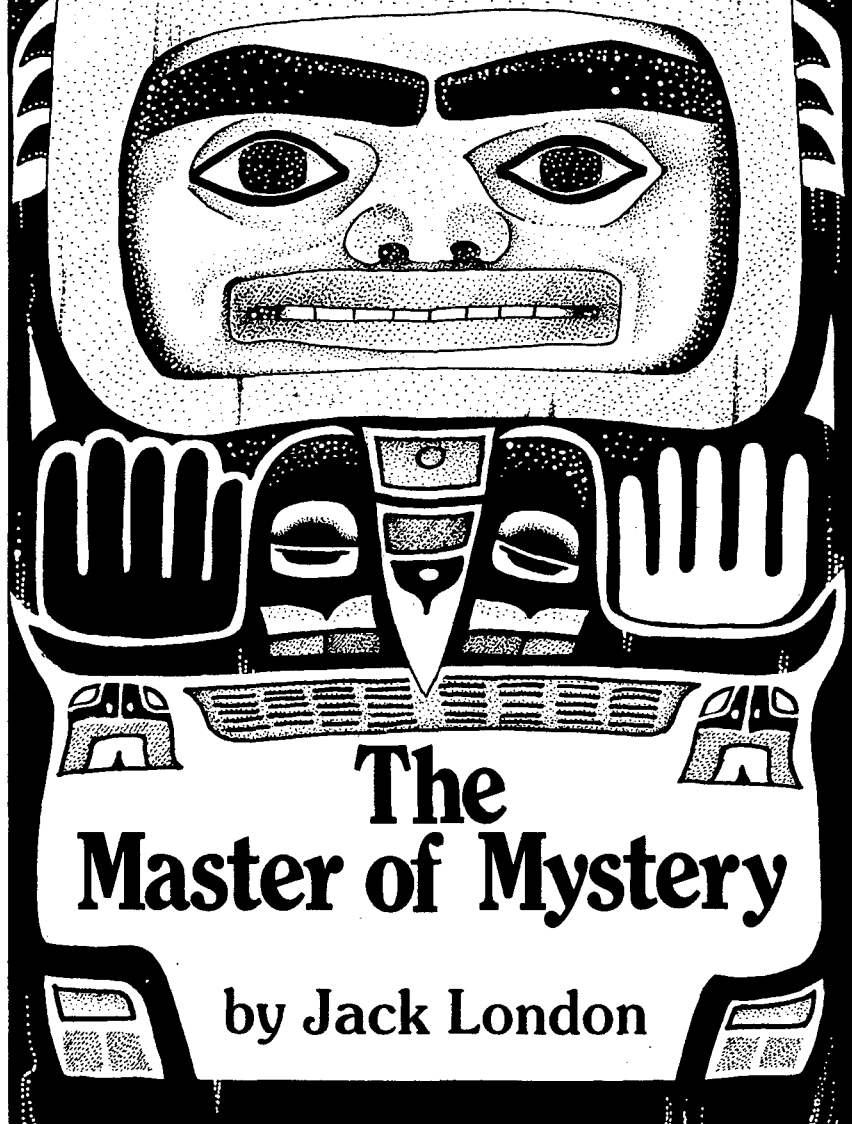
I disengaged her arms from my neck. "I'm a detective, and a detective has a job to do," I told her. "You're in this up to your cheeks, sweetheart, and you're going over for it."

She looked at me with huge, wet eyes. "Woody, how could you do this?"

I showed her my teeth. "It was easy," I said.



MYSTERY CLASSIC



# The Master of Mystery

by Jack London

**T**here was complaint in the village. The women chattered together with shrill, high-pitched voices. The men were glum and doubtful of aspect, and the very dogs wandered dubiously about, alarmed in vague ways by the unrest of the camp, and ready to take to the woods on the first outbreak of trouble. The air was filled with suspicion. No man was sure of his neighbor, and each was conscious that he stood in like unsureness with his fellows. Even the children were oppressed and solemn, and little Di Ya, the cause of it all, had been soundly thrashed, first by Hooniah, his mother, and then by his father, Bawn, and was now whimpering and looking pessimistically out upon the world from the shelter of the big overturned canoe on the beach.

And to make the matter worse, Scundoo, the shaman, was in disgrace, and his known magic could not be called upon to seek out the evil-doer. Forsooth, a month gone, he had promised a fair south wind so that the tribe might journey to the *potlatch* at Tonkin, where Taku Jim was giving away the savings of twenty years; and when the day came, lo, a grievous north wind blew, and of the first three canoes to venture forth, one was swamped in the big seas, and two were pounded to pieces on the rocks, and a child was drowned. He had pulled the string of the wrong bag, he explained—a mistake. But the people refused to listen; the offerings of meat and fish and fur ceased to come to his door; and he sulked within—so they thought, fasting in bitter penance; in reality, eating generously from his well-stored cache and meditating upon the fickleness of the mob.

The blankets of Hooniah were missing. They were good blankets, of most marvelous thickness and warmth, and her pride in them was greatedened in that they had been come by so cheaply. Ty-Kwan, of the next village but one, was a fool to have so easily parted with them. But then, she did not know they were the blankets of the murdered Englishman because of whose take-off the United States cutter nosed along the coast for a time, while its launches puffed and snorted among the secret inlets. And not knowing that Ty-Kwan had disposed of them in haste so that his own people might not have to render account to the government, Hooniah's pride was unshaken. And because the women envied her, her pride was without end and boundless, till it filled the village and spilled over along the Alaskan shore from Dutch Harbor to St. Mary's. Her totem had become justly celebrated, and her name known on the

lips of men wherever men fished and feasted, that of the blankets and their marvelous thickness and warmth. It was a most mysterious happening, the manner of their going.

"I but stretched them up in the sun by the side-wall of the house," Hooniah disclaimed for the thousandth time to her Thlinket sisters. "I but stretched them up and turned my back; for Di Ya, dough-thief and eater of raw flour that he is, with head into the big iron pot, overturned and stuck there, his legs waving like the branches of a forest tree in the wind. And I did but drag him out and twice knock his head against the door for riper understanding, and behold, the blankets were not!"

"The blankets were not!" the women repeated in awed whispers.

"A great loss," one added. A second, "Never were there such blankets." And a third, "We be sorry, Hooniah, for thy loss." Yet each woman of them was glad in her heart that the odious, dis-sension-breeding blankets were gone.

"I but stretched them up in the sun," Hooniah began for the thousand and first time.

"Yea, yea," Bawn spoke up, wearied. "But there were no gossips in the village from other places. Wherefore it be plain that some of our own tribespeople have laid unlawful hand upon the blankets."

"How can that be, O Bawn?" the women chorused indignantly. "Who should there be?"

"Then there has been witchcraft," Bawn continued stolidly enough, though he stole a sly glance at their faces.

"*Witchcraft!*" And at the dread word their voices hushed and each looked fearfully at each.

"Ay," Hooniah affirmed, the latent malignancy of her nature flashing into a moment's exultation. "And word has been sent to Klok-No-Ton, and strong paddles. Truly shall he be here with the afternoon tide."

The little groups broke up, and fear descended upon the village. Of all misfortune, witchcraft was the most appalling. With the intangible and unseen things only the shamans could cope, and neither man, woman, nor child could know, until the moment of ordeal, whether devils possessed their souls or not. And of all shamans, Klok-No-Ton, who dwelt in the next village, was the most terrible. None found more evil spirits than he, none visited his victims with more frightful tortures. Even had he found, once, a

devil residing within the body of a three-months babe—a most obstinate devil which could only be driven out when the babe had lain for a week on thorns and briers. The body was thrown into the sea after that, but the waves tossed it back again and again as a curse upon the village, nor did it finally go away till two strong men were staked out at low tide and drowned.

And Hooniah had sent for this Klok-No-Ton. Better had it been if Scundoo, their own shaman, were undisgraced. For he had ever a gentler way, and he had been known to drive forth two devils from a man who afterward begat seven healthy children. But Klok-No-Ton! They shuddered with dire foreboding at the thought of him, and each one felt himself the center of accusing eyes, and looked accusingly upon his fellows—each one and all, save Sime, and Sime was a scoffer whose evil end was destined with a certitude his successes could not shake.

"Hoh! Hoh!" he laughed. "Devils and Klok-No-Ton!—than whom no greater devil can be found in Thlinket Land."

"Thou fool! Even now he cometh with witcheries and sorceries; so beware thy tongue, lest evil befall thee and thy days be short in the land!"

So spoke La-lah, otherwise the Cheater, and Sime laughed scornfully.

"I am Sime, unused to fear, unafraid of the dark. I am a strong man, as my father before me, and my head is clear. Nor you nor I have seen with our eyes the unseen evil things—"

"But Scundoo hath," La-lah made answer. "And likewise Klok-No-Ton. This we know."

"How dost thou know, son of a fool?" Sime thundered, the choleric blood darkening his thick bull neck.

"By the word of their mouths—even so."

Sime snorted. "A shaman is only a man. May not his words be crooked, even as thine and mine? Bah! Bah! And once more, bah! And this for thy shamans and thy shamans' devils! and this! and this!"

And snapping his fingers to right and left, Sime strode through the onlookers, who made overzealous and fearsome way for him.

"A good fisher and strong hunter, but an evil man," said one.

"Yet does he flourish," speculated another.

"Wherefore be thou evil and flourish," Sime retorted over his shoulder. "And were all evil, there would be no need for shamans. Bah! You children-afraid-of-the-dark!"

And when Klok-No-Ton arrived on the afternoon tide, Sime's defiant laugh was unabated; nor did he forbear to make a joke when the shaman tripped on the sand in the landing. Klok-No-Ton looked at him sourly, and without greeting stalked straight through their midst to the house of Scundoo.

Of the meeting with Scundoo, none of the tribespeople might know, for they clustered reverently in the distance and spoke in whispers while the masters of mystery were together.

"Greeting, O Scundoo!" Klok-No-Ton rumbled, wavering perceptibly from doubt of his reception.

He was a giant in stature, and towered massively above little Scundoo, whose thin voice floated upward like the faint rasping of a cricket.

"Greeting, Klok-No-Ton," he returned. "The day is fair with thy coming."

"Yet it would seem . . ." Klok-No-Ton hesitated.

"Yea, yea," the little shaman put in impatiently, "that I have fallen on ill days else would I not stand in gratitude to you in that you do my work."

"It grieves me, friend Scundoo . . ."

"Nay, I am made glad, Klok-No-Ton."

"But will I give thee half of that which be given me."

"Not so, good Klok-No-Ton," murmured Scundoo, with a deprecatory wave of the hand. "It is I who am thy slave, and my days shall be filled with desire to befriend thee."

"As I—"

"As thou now befriendest me."

"That being so, it is then a bad business, these blankets of the woman Hooniah?"

The big shaman blundered tentatively in his quest, and Scundoo smiled a wan, gray smile, for he was used to reading men, and all men seemed very small to him.

"Ever hast thou dealt in strong medicine," he said. "Doubtless the evil-doer will be briefly known to thee."

"Ay, briefly known when I set eyes upon him." Again Klok-No-Ton hesitated. "Have there been gossips from other places?" he asked.

Scundoo shook his head. "Behold! Is this not a most excellent mucluc?"

He held up the foot-covering of sealskin and walrus hide, and his visitor examined it with secret interest.

"It did come to me by a close-driven bargain."

Klok-No-Ton nodded attentively.

"I got it from the man La-lah. He is a remarkable man, and often have I thought . . ."

"So?" Klok-No-Ton ventured impatiently.

"Often have I thought," Scundoo concluded, his voice falling as he came to a full pause. "It is a fair day, and thy medicine be strong, Klok-No-Ton."

Klok-No-Ton's face brightened. "Thou art a great man, Scundoo, a shaman of shamans. I go now. I shall remember thee always. And the man, La-lah, as you say, is a remarkable man."

Scundoo smiled yet more wan and gray, closed the door on the heels of his departing visitor, and barred and double-barred it.

Sime was mending his canoe when Klok-No-Ton came down the beach, and he broke off from his work only long enough to ostentatiously load his rifle and place it near him.

The shaman noted the action and called out: "Let all the people come together on this spot! It is the word of Klok-No-Ton, devil-seeker and driver of devils!"

He had been minded to assemble them at Hooniah's house, but it was necessary that all should be present, and he was doubtful of Sime's obedience and did not wish trouble. Sime was a good man and let alone, his judgment ran, and withal, a bad one for the health of any shaman.

"Let the woman Hooniah be brought," Klok-No-Ton commanded, glaring ferociously about the circle and sending chills up and down the spines of those he looked upon.

Hooniah waddled forward, head bent and gaze averted.

"Where be thy blankets?"

"I but stretched them up in the sun, and behold, they were not!" she whined.

"So?"

"It was because of Di Ya."

"So?"

"Him I have beaten sore, and he shall yet be beaten, for that he brought trouble upon us who be poor people."

"The blankets!" Klok-No-Ton bellowed hoarsely, foreseeing her desire to lower the price to be paid. "The blankets, woman! Thy wealth is known."

"I but stretched them up in the sun," she sniffled, "and we be poor people and have nothing."

He stiffened suddenly, with a hideous distortion of the face, and Hooniah shrank back. But so swiftly did he spring forward, with in-turned eyeballs and loosened jaw, that she stumbled and fell down groveling at his feet. He waved his arms about, wildly flagellating the air, his body writhing and twisting in torment. An epilepsy seemed to come upon him. A white froth flecked his lips, and his body was convulsed with shiverings and tremblings.

The women broke into a wailing chant, swaying backward and forward in abandonment, while one by one the men succumbed to the excitement till only Sime remained. He, perched upon his canoe, looked on in mockery; yet the ancestors whose seed he bore pressed heavily upon him, and he swore his strongest oaths that his courage might be cheered. Klok-No-Ton was horrible to behold. He had cast off his blanket and torn his clothes from him, so that he was quite naked, save for a girdle of eagle-claws about his thighs. Shrieking and yelling, his long black hair flying like a blot of night, he leaped frantically about the circle. A certain rude rhythm characterized his frenzy, and when all were under its sway, swinging their bodies in accord with his and venting their cries in unison, he sat bolt upright, with arm outstretched and long-talon-like finger extended. A low moaning, as of the dead, greeted this, and the people cowered with shaking knees as the dread finger passed them slowly by. For death went with it, and life remained with those who watched it go; and being rejected, they watched with eager intentness.

Finally, with a tremendous cry, the fateful finger rested upon La-lah. He shook like an aspen, seeing himself already dead, his household goods divided, and his widow married to his brother. He strove to speak, to deny, but his tongue clove to his mouth and his throat was sanded with an intolerable thirst. Klok-No-Ton seemed to half swoon away, now that his work was done; but he waited, with closed eyes, listening for the great blood-cry to go up—the great blood-cry, familiar to his ear from a thousand conjurations, when the tribespeople flung themselves like wolves upon the trembling victim. But only was there silence, then a low tittering, from nowhere in particular, which spread and spread until a vast laughter welled up to the sky.

"Wherefore?" he cried.

"Na! Na!" the people laughed. "Thy medicine be ill, O Klok-No-Ton!"

"It be known to all," La-lah stuttered. "For eight weary months



have I been gone afar with the Siwash sealers, and but this day am I come back to find the blankets of Hooniah gone ere I came!"

"It be true!" they cried with one accord. "The blankets of Hooniah were gone ere he came!"

"And thou shalt be paid nothing for thy medicine which is of no avail," announced Hooniah, on her feet once more and smarting from a sense of ridiculousness.

But Klok-No-Ton saw only the face of Scundoo and its wan, gray smile, heard only the faint far cricket's rasping. "I got it from the man La-lah, and often have I thought," and, "It is a fair day and thy medicine be strong."

He brushed by Hooniah, and the circle instinctively gave way for him to pass. Sime flung a jeer from the top of the canoe, the women snickered in his face, cries of derision rose in his wake, but he took no notice, pressing onward to the house of Scundoo. He hammered on the door, beat it with his fists, and howled vile imprecations. Yet there was no response, save that in the lulls Scundoo's voice rose eerily in incantation. Klok-No-Ton raged about like a madman, but when he attempted to break in the door with a huge stone, murmurs arose from the men and women. And he, Klok-No-Ton, knew that he stood shorn of his strength and authority before an alien people. He saw a man stoop for a stone, and a second, and a bodily fear ran through him.

"Harm not Scundoo, who is a master!" a woman cried out.

"Better you return to your own village," a man advised menacingly.

Klok-No-Ton turned on his heel and went down among them to the beach, a bitter rage at his heart, and in his head a just apprehension for his defenseless back. But no stones were cast. The children swarmed mockingly about his feet, and the air was wild with laughter and derision, but that was all. Yet he did not breathe freely until the canoe was well out upon the water, when he rose up and laid a futile curse upon the village and its people, not forgetting to particularly specify Scundoo who had made a mock of him.

Ashore there was a clamor for Scundoo, and the whole population crowded his door, entreating and imploring in confused babel till he came forth and raised his hand.

"In that ye are my children I pardon freely," he said. "But never again. For the last time thy foolishness goes unpunished. That

which ye wish shall be granted, and it be already known to me. This night, when the moon has gone behind the world to look upon the mighty dead, let all the people gather in the blackness before the house of Hooniah. Then shall the evil-doer stand forth and take his merited reward. I have spoken."

"It shall be death!" Bawn vociferated, "for that it hath brought worry upon us, and shame."

"So be it," Scundoo replied, and shut his door.

"Now shall all be made clear and plain, and content rest upon us once again," La-lah declaimed oracularly.

"Because of Scundoo, the little man," Sime sneered.

"Because of the medicine of Scundoo, the little man," La-lah corrected.

"Children of foolishness, these Thlinket people!" Sime smote his thigh a resounding blow. "It passeth understanding that grown women and strong men should get down in the dirt to dreamings and wonder tales."

"I am a traveled man," La-lah answered. "I have journeyed on the deep seas and seen things and wonders, and I know that these things be so. I am La-lah—"

"The Cheater—"

"So called, but the Far-Journeyer right-named."

"I am not so great a traveler—" Sime began.

"Then hold thy tongue," Bawn cut in, and they separated in anger.

When the last silver moonlight had vanished beyond the world, Scundoo came among the people huddled about the house of Hooniah. He walked with a quick, alert step, and those who saw him in the light of Hooniah's slush-lamp noticed that he came empty-handed, without rattles, masks, or shaman's paraphernalia, save for a great sleepy raven carried under one arm.

"Is there wood gathered for a fire, so that all may see when the work be done?" he demanded.

"Yea," Bawn answered. "There be wood in plenty."

"Then let all listen, for my words be few. With me have I brought Jelchs, the Raven, diviner of mystery and seer of things. Him, in his blackness, shall I place under the big black pot of Hooniah, in the blackest corner of her house. The slush-lamp shall cease to burn, and all remain in outer darkness. It is very simple. One by one shall ye go into the house, lay hand upon the pot for the space

of one long intake of breath, and withdraw again. Doubtless Jelchs will make outcry when the hand of the evil-doer is nigh him. Or who knows but otherwise he may manifest his wisdom. Are ye ready?"

"We be ready," came the multi-voiced response.

"Then will I call the name aloud, each in his turn and hers, till all are called."

Thereat La-lah was first chosen, and he passed in at once. Every ear strained, and through the silence they could hear his footsteps creaking across the rickety floor. But that was all. Jelchs made no outcry, gave no sign. Bawn was next chosen, for it well might be that a man should steal his own blankets with intent to cast shame upon his neighbors. Hooniah followed, and other women and children, but without result.

"Sime!" Scundoo called out.

"Sime!" he repeated.

But Sime did not stir.

"Art thou afraid of the dark?" La-lah, his own integrity being proved, demanded fiercely.

Sime chuckled. "I laugh at it all, for it is a great foolishness. Yet will I go in, not in belief in wonders, but in token that I am unafraid."

And he passed in boldly, and came out still mocking.

"Some day shalt thou die with great suddenness," La-lah whispered, righteously indignant.

"I doubt not," the scoffer answered airily. "Few men of us die in our beds, what of the shamans and the deep sea."

When half the villagers had safely undergone the ordeal, the excitement because of its repression was painfully intense. When two-thirds had gone through, a young woman, close on her first child-bed, broke down and in nervous shrieks and laughter gave form to her terror.

Finally the turn came for the last of all to go in, and nothing had happened. And Di Ya was the last of all. It must surely be he. Hooniah let out a lament to the stars, while the rest drew back from the luckless lad. He was half-dead from fright, and his legs gave under him so that he staggered on the threshold and nearly fell. Scundoo shoved him inside and closed the door. A long time went by, during which could be heard only the boy's weeping. Nothing had happened, and he was the last.

"Let the fire be lighted," Scundoo commanded.

The bright flames rushed upward, revealing faces yet marked with vanishing fear, but also clouded with doubt.

"Surely the thing has failed," Hooniah whispered hoarsely.

"Yea," Bawn answered complacently. "Scundoo groweth old, and we stand in need of a new shaman."

"Where now is the wisdom of Jelchs?" Sime snickered in La-lah's ear.

La-lah brushed his brow in a puzzled manner and said nothing.

Sime threw his chest out arrogantly and strutted up to the little shaman. "Hoh! Hoh! As I said, nothing has come of it!"

"So it would seem, so it would seem," Scundoo answered meekly.

"And it would seem strange to those unskilled in the affairs of mystery."

"As thou?" Sime queried audaciously.

"Mayhap even as I." Scundoo spoke quite softly, his eyelids drooping, slowly drooping, down, down, till his eyes were all but hidden. "So I am minded of another test. Let every man, woman, and child, now and at once, hold their hands well up above their heads!"

So unexpected was the order, and so imperatively was it given, that it was obeyed without question. Every hand was in the air.

"Let each look on the other's hands, and let all look," Scundoo commanded, "so that—"

But a noise of laughter, which was more of wrath, drowned his voice. All eyes had come to rest upon Sime. Every hand but his was black with soot, and his was guiltless of the smirch of Hooniah's pot.

A stone hurtled through the air and struck him on the cheek.

"It is a lie!" he yelled. "A lie! I know naught of Hooniah's blankets!"

A second stone gashed his brow, a third whistled past his head, the great blood-cry went up, and everywhere were people groping on the ground for missiles. He staggered and half sank down.

"It was a joke! Only a joke!" he shrieked. "I but took them for a joke!"

"Where hast thou hidden them?" Scundoo's shrill, sharp voice cut through the tumult like a knife.

"In the large skin-bale in my house, the one slung by the ridge-pole," came the answer. "But it was a joke, I say, only—"

Scundoo nodded his head, and the air went thick with flying

stones. Sime's wife was crying silently, her head upon her knees; but his little boy, with shrieks and laughter, was flinging stones with the rest.

Hooniah came waddling back with the precious blankets. Scundoo stopped her.

"We be poor people and have little," she whimpered. "So be not hard upon us, O Scundoo."

The people ceased from the quivering stonepile they had built, and looked on.

"Nay, it was never my way, good Hooniah," Scundoo made answer, reaching for the blankets. "In token that I am not hard, these only shall I take."

"Am I not wise, my children?" he demanded.

"Thou art indeed wise, O Scundoo!" they cried in one voice.

And he went away into the darkness, the blankets around him, and Jelchs nodding sleepily under his arm.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":**

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The God of Diplomacy was on the left, the God of Falsehood was in the middle, and the God of Truth was on the right.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



JOHN D. MacDonald

Photo by Dorothy Prentiss MacDonald

“I thought of death and money and blue-eyed tears. And some other blue eyes gone blind. This emotional obligation did not fit me. I felt awkward in the uncomfortable role. I wished to be purely McGee, that pale-eyed, wire-haired girl-finder, that big shambling brown boat-bum who walks beaches, slays small fierce fish, busts minor icons, argues, smiles and disbelieves, that knuckly-scar-tissued reject from a structured society, who waits until the money gets low, and then goes out and takes it from the taker, keeps half, and gives the rest back to the innocent. These matters can best be handled by the uninvolved.”

The speaker is Travis McGee in *Nightmare in Pink*, one of the more than twenty novels in

which he is the hero. MacDonald himself has authored three times as many novels, but mystery fans know him especially for the Travis McGee books. If it's possible that any reader of this column has never read one, let me give you a brief introduction to one of detective fiction's best-loved practitioners.

Travis McGee describes himself quite accurately above, but there's much more he didn't mention. He makes his home on a once-posh houseboat called the *Busted Flush*, which he won in a card game and which is usually moored in Bahia Mar, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. His neighbor and closest friend is Meyer, a brilliant, hairy, chess-playing, charismatic, retired economist. Their friendship

gives Travis McGee a sidekick, and their conversation allows their creator, MacDonald, to discourse on any number of topics close to his heart, such as ecology, overpopulation, the drug culture, and the inhumanity of large corporations.

The moral stance taken by McGee is crucial to the tales. He maintains that he works only when his money has run out, and as his needs are few, that isn't all that often. Then, when he takes on a case, he works for "salvage" fees: that is, he agrees to find something that is lost and charges half its value. This is his code, and he takes his code seriously. In actuality, though, he usually works out of loyalty (also part of his code), helping an old girlfriend or the relative of such a one (and there are many, many of those in his past). Along the way he encounters danger, which he faces with courage, a quick wit, and a philosophical outlook. He also comes up against evil—actually easier for him to face because Travis McGee is largely incorruptible.

Aside from McGee's stands on political and sociological issues, there's McGee's stand on personal ones. There's a lot of psychologizing in these novels, adding an interest and depth to the characters who are playing out the dramas. There's always a love interest, and surely

women readers have long been attracted to McGee, who seems to truly like and appreciate women as people without being chauvinistic or patronizing. McGee winds up doing a lot of healing work, nursing injured females and coaxing them back to life, be it physical or emotional wounds from which they suffer. For male readers, there's always the appeal of the many beautiful and fascinating women who become McGee's lovers.

Finally, there's loads of action in every book, and the situations and danger are different each time. MacDonald writes with muscle and lots of imagination; he's given Travis McGee enough personal quirks and props to keep him interesting, and yet familiar to his fans. Pick up *The Lonely Silver Rain*, the latest in paperback to bear—as all the Travis McGee books do—a color in its title, and you'll get some old friends, some new twists, and generally a rip-roaring good tale with some surprises. That is, after all, exactly what fans of a mystery series are looking for. They have been finding it in John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee books for thirty-five years now.

(The Travis McGee novels are available in Fawcett paperback editions.)



## MYSTERY REVIEWS

Nick O'Donohoe has given us a private eye named Nathan Phillips who stars in **Wind Chill** (PaperJacks, \$2.95, 207 pp.). The setting is Minneapolis, where icy winds, mounds of snow, and sub-zero temperatures can be a bigger enemy than an amateur black-mailer, a manic FBI agent, or even a seasoned IRA terrorist. Phillips has to contend with all this and more once he pulls in his ice-fishing line and finds that a mutilated corpse was his catch of the day. Phillips is engaging, his landlady and various friends make a strong supporting cast, and the choice of the Twin Cities as a setting adds a fresh note to the business of private detecting. Pick this up on a sultry summer day and see if it doesn't cool you off.

Sergeant Hoke Moseley of *Miami Blues* returns in **New Hope for the Dead** (St. Martin's Press, \$14.95, 244 pp.) by Charles Willeford. Willeford's style is punchy and often gritty; Moseley has his own rules and he's fair, but he's certainly no conventional hero. Along with his current investigation of a teenager's apparent drug overdose, Hoke is hit with a barrage of personal problems: he has to find a new apartment within the Miami city limits, his ex-wife unexpectedly drops Hoke's two young daughters in his lap, and Hoke's partner, a Cuban policewoman, gets kicked out of her parents' home because she is pregnant. And all of this turmoil must be dealt with in Hoke's spare time because his current assignment is to solve some of the "cold cases," the unsolved Miami crimes of past years, so that his boss gets a promotion. Though Willeford shows us the seamy side of police work, Hoke's humanity ultimately gives the novel an upbeat tone.

Sister Carol Anne O'Marie's first mystery, **A Novena for Murder**, is now out in paperback (Dell, \$3.25, 183 pp.), and that will surely widen her readership. So it should, for *Novena* and its protagonist, the recently retired Sister Mary Helen, is bound to appeal to fans of Miss Marple, Miss Silver, and Virginia Rich's books. Sister Mary Helen is a prolific reader of mysteries, an ex-teacher who resisted her retirement to the Mother House in San Francisco for as long as she could. She was afraid she'd find it dull. Instead, she finds herself in an isolated community that is obviously, albeit unwittingly, sheltering a murderer. Homicide inspectors Kate Murphy and Dennis Gallagher (who also happen to be lovers) almost don't heed the acutely perceptive old nun until it's too late. A peek into a convent and its daily routine, and the lives of its inhabitants, is an added bonus, piled generously on top of a solid plot and winning characters.

The jacket for **The Man Who Shot Lewis Vance** by Stuart Kaminsky (St. Martin's Press, \$14.95, 194 pp.) has a great painting of the young John Wayne, a gun in his right hand and a startled expression on his celebrated face. Then one realizes that this is another Toby Peters mystery and all becomes clear because Toby is the Hollywood private eye of the 1940's whose practice, although not always that lucrative, often requires that he rub shoulders with the film folks. In addition to rather large supporting roles played by the Duke, Ward Bond, and other cronies, and a very nice portrayal of Charlie Chaplin, Toby is aided by his tough older brother who's a cop, and by a retired policeman (and a wonderful character) named Merit "Straight-Ahead" Beason. Anyway, there's a tangled web of murder, blackmail, and fraud, with a deadly coverup waiting in the wings, too. Kaminsky injects a lot of humor into these breezy period mysteries, capturing the zaniness that must have been part of the Hollywood scene then. If you've never read a Toby Peters mystery, pick up the one with John Wayne on the jacket, and "roll 'em."

It might be fair to recommend P. C. Doherty's **The Death of a King** to Ellis Peters fans, and to those who loved Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, for Doherty's novel, subtitled "A Medieval Mystery," is set in mid-fourteenth century England. The novel is epistolary; the complex plot is related almost entirely by a smart but humble (fictional) royal clerk named Edmund Beche who is commissioned by his king to research the truth of the murder of his father, King Edward II (which is not at all fictional). Doherty has a doctorate in history from Oxford, and I trust that his historical background is accurate. Certainly it's fascinating, for it involves royal infidelity, much political plotting, vengeance, and betrayal. Beche himself is thoroughly engaging, and his letters to an old school chum (which make up the bulk of the novel) are intended to ensure his personal safety, for he knows from the start that the king has asked him to ferret out some long-held and probably dangerous secrets. Beche is also all too aware of how expendable he is to the current king, and how easy it would be to make him disappear once he's revealed all he has discovered. History buffs will recognize that Doherty has picked an historical incident that is truly shrouded in mystery, and I imagine they will especially applaud his hypothetical solution—it so neatly fits the known facts. But it doesn't require a degree in history to get involved in Beche's task, to share his exciting adventures, and to hope he has the wit to survive. (St. Martin's Press, \$12.95, 176 pp.)

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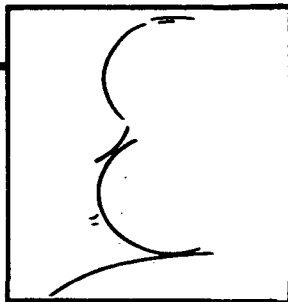


*American National Enterprises, Inc.*

Greg Mullavey (right), playing the detective in *Vultures*, confronts suspect Stuart Whitman.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



In the mystery movie genre a near miss tends to be as good as a mile. **Vultures** has a workmanlike enough premise. The heirs to a fortune are being killed off one by one, either to shift the inheritance to one of their relatives or else as part of a revenge plot to cast an innocent family member as a murderer. Suspicion gradually narrows as the number of heirs diminishes, but false identities abound, and the killer becomes more elusive even as the number of suspects diminishes.

*Vultures* also has its star performers. Stuart Whitman plays a disillusioned former lawyer who has been running a charter boat service since being framed for a crime some fourteen years ago. Yvonne de Carlo is his philandering married sister. Either of them could inherit all the

money. It looks as if Yvonne must be the murdering mastermind when her husband, played by Aldo Ray, is killed. But her innocence is established when she, too, becomes a victim.

The use of these actors of a past era was evidently patterned on *Sunset Boulevard*, in which Gloria Swanson, Erich Von Stroheim, and other stars of the silent movies lent a spectral air to a 1950's story of Hollywood. Something of Yvonne de Carlo's harem girl and honkytonk, Western bad-girl aura has already been successfully exploited in the television series, *The Munsters*. Stuart Whitman's best role was that of a persecuted and self-doubting man in *The Mark* (1961), so that he made a good choice to play the falsely suspected family member in *Vultures*. Finally, Aldo Ray brings with

him wherever he goes memories of his raspy voiced wing-stiff and tough-GI roles.

Unfortunately, Aldo Ray and Yvonne de Carlo prove to have been given cameo roles. Stuart Whitman is there all the way through, and manages to turn in the movie's one creditable performance. But that haunted look about the eyes is gone: he is just a very good looking former movie star.

The problem with *Vultures* comes down to a lack of what the French call *progression d'effet*. The term refers to the careful building up of details (for which Hitchcock is famous) so that each step in the plot increases the viewer's concern about the characters and their predicament. In *Vultures*, characters get blown up or stabbed or shot to death too soon to evoke real concern. Thus when an out of work actor comes on the scene and quickly stumbles on a clue, his being followed into a lonely dressing room by the murderer moves the audience less than if he had unknowingly put himself in peril of slipping on a wet floor. The poor handling of the killings in *Vultures* makes one appreciate director René Clair's elegantly timed murders in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1945).

Potentially the best feature

of *Vultures* is its disguises. An actor named Jim Bailey plays six roles, and only in the last of these—where he dresses up as a woman named Olivia Mann—does one begin to catch on. When he is unmasked, he insanely insists (in an obvious replay of Hitchcock's *Psycho*) that he really is Olivia Mann. Yet the revelation of his disguise is ill-prepared for. The last scene would have been far more effective if audience suspicion about Bailey's disguises had been aroused from the outset. As it is, one senses something peculiar about the characters played by Bailey, but puts it down to bad acting, of which there is plenty in *Vultures*. The uncovering of Bailey's multiple roles could have provided a series of dramatic surprises. Instead, the only surprise is anticlimactically revealed after the action is over—in the closing credits.

Like *Perfect Strangers*, which we briefly but favorably reviewed last December, *Vultures* is a movie that has apparently never been given theatrical release. *Perfect Strangers* went straight to video cassette, but *Vultures* is being shown on television. It brought back memories of the great days of its stars, and it reminded us how fine a line divides a good mystery movie from a failure.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The February Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Wanda Blank Freynick of Alexandria, Virginia. Honorable mentions go to Ontario, Canada; Catherine John Scott Gens of Liverpool, Burbank, California; C.S. Kirby

Pyle of Rensselaer, New York; Willie Rose of Antioch, California; Desmond Cameron of Minneapolis, Minnesota; Debra Curry of Fort Worth, Texas; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Anne H. Janzer of Palo Alto, California; David Beckman of New York, New York; and Mark Truman of Midway City, California.

tograph contest (photo above) Freynick of Alexandria, Virginia; H.P. Stabitz of Markham, Balkin of Brooklyn, New York; New York; Tara Untiedt of Frederick, Maryland; L. H.

## SMOKESTACK CITY CAPER by Wanda Blank Freynick

At quitting time, laborers at the Smokestack City Motor Company exploded out of the plant, hurried away, and within minutes had emptied the street.

Later, Mack Track, still at his desk like the other executives, looked up as the three notorious Train brothers burst into his office. It was another Train robbery.

"All your money," demanded the one who had engineered the plot.

"Yeah, put on some steam," screamed another, his gun conducting Track to the safe.

Just as Mack handed over a stack, his brother and colleague Jack cracked open the door in back, pointing a gun at the Trains.

"We gotta vamoose," yelled the caboose brother, going off the rails. "The timetable's backfired."

Once outside, the Trains raced down the street with the Tracks close behind them.

"Where's our getaway car?" chugged the leader in panic.

"Gotta be here somewhere," called his brother, puffing like a steam engine.

The third Train whistled sharply. "Look, across the railroad. Why is it there?"

But before they could switch direction, a squad car spun broadside across the street in the path of the runaway Trains. Striking them from behind, Jack and Mack Track pinned them to the ground for the police.

At the station, the Trains swore, fumed, and railed because they had been brought up and reared on the wrong side of the tracks.



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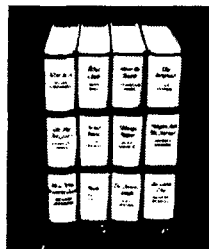
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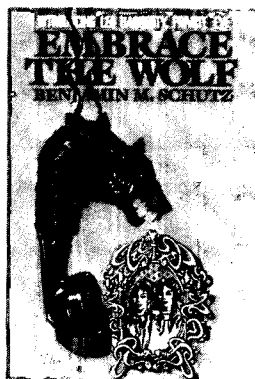
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